

NEITHER ASLEEP NOR AWAKE

In his *Life of Mesrop*, Koriun ascribes a divine origin to the Armenian alphabet: God had granted «with His holy right hand, the characters of the Armenian language»¹. Ghazar P'arpeti had a similar view: the matter had been directed by the Saviour². In a work dedicated to St Sahak it is explained that Mesrop had resorted to prayer when he realised that «the solution of the matter would be from God and not Man»³. Movsēs Khorenatsi expanded on these brief statements: Mesrop had turned to prayer after he had found himself unable to complete the alphabet. In answer to his prayer, he had received a revelation which was

not a dream in sleep, nor a vision while awake, but a right hand appeared to the eyes of the spirit in his heart, writing on a [polished] stone, making marks as in snow. And not only was it visualised but all the details were collected in his mind as [if it were] a pot. And rising from [his] prayers, he created our characters⁴.

Regarding Movsēs's account, a number of modern scholars have expressed the view that the details of the miraculous origin were an invention, and the ascription of divine assistance has been considered to demean Mesrop's achievement. Hence no attempt has been made to elucidate its meaning⁵. Malkhasyan's view is typical:

1. KORIUN, *The life of Mashtots*, reprint of Manuk ABELEAN's edition with an English translation by Bedros Norehad (New York, 1964), chapt. 8, p. 71 f.
2. ĠAZAR P'arpeti, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, I, 10 (Venice, 1933), p. 46.
3. *Patmut'iun vash srboyn Sahakay*, Sop'erk' Haykakank' 2 (Venice 1853), p. 9 f.
4. Եւ տեսանէ ոչ ի քուն երազ եւ ոչ յարութեան տեսիլ, այլ ի սրտին գործարանի երեւութացեալ հոգւոյն աչաց թաթ ձեռին ալոյ՝ գրելով ի վերայ վիմի, զի որպէս է ձեան վերջը գծին՝ կուտեալ ունէր քարն: Եւ ոչ միայն երեւութացաւ, այլ եւ հանգամանք ամենայնին որպէս յաման ինչ ի միտս նորա հաւաքեցաւ: Եւ յարուցեալ յաղօթիցն՝ հստեղծ զնշանազիրս մեր, ... MOVSEŠ Xorenac'i, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, III, 53.
5. E. G. H. AČAREAN, «Mesrop Maštoc'», *Ejmiacin*, 1955, No. 3, p. 30-31.

of course, no miracle had taken place; the invention of our alphabet was a consequence of Mesrop's extensive and solid efforts. The vision described by Khorenatsi is a purely theoretical construct⁶.

Revelations received in dreams are reported frequently in ancient records such as the Bible⁷, as are those when the recipients were awake. They are juxtaposed in *Joel*:

your old men shall dream dreams,
your young men shall see visions⁸.

Both dream (*eraz*) and vision (*tesil*) occur in Armenian literature⁹. St Grigor the illuminator, for instance, saw a vision which instructed him to build a church at a specific spot in the capital city of Vagharshapat¹⁰. St Nersēs was seen being taken up to heaven on his death¹¹, and Anania Shirakatsi saw a vision of a Sun-being in a dream¹².

In attributing an heavenly origin to Mesrop's alphabet, Armenian writers were subscribing to the early medieval belief that all thoughts and ideas were revelations from the spiritual world¹³. Movsēs, however, went beyond this general attribution by his statement that Mesrop had been neither asleep nor awake at the time and his description of the manner by which the message had entered his mind. Whether or not this account was a «theoretical construct», the implication is that Mesrop had been in a different state of consciousness, which Movsēs found it unnecessary to explain.

If the story were an invention, would a simple traditional vision not have sufficed for Movsēs's purpose? In the case of the kat'oghikos Sahak's vision, he found it sufficient to note that it had been revealed to him «in

6. Մի տեսության հանրահայտը. S. MALXASEAN, modern Armenian translation of MOVSĒS Xorenac'i's *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, reprint of first edn. (Cairo, 1953), p. 545, n. 314.

7. E. g. *Matthew*, 1. 20-21, 2. 12-13, 19-20, 22.

8. *Joel*, 2. 28.

9. The two Greek words for vision used in the New Testament are not distinguished in the Armenian, both being translated as *tesil*; viz. *optasia* (*Luke* 24. 23; *Acts* 26. 19), and *orama* (*Matthew* 17. 9; *Acts* 10. 3).

10. AGAT'ANGELOS, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, para. 731-755. For a discussion of Grigor's vision, see Anders HULTGÅRD, «Change and continuity in the religion of ancient Armenia», in Thomas J. SAMUELIAN (ed.), *Classical Armenian culture*, University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 4 (1982), pp. 8-26.

11. P'AUSTOS Buzand, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, V. 25.

12. K'. PATKANEAN (ed.), *Mnac'ordk' banic'* (St Petersburg, 1877), pp. 39-40.

13. Rudolf STEINER, *The Michael mystery* (Spring Valley, NY, 1984), pp. 1, 9 f.

sleep»¹⁴. Why then did he emphasise that Mesrop's revelation had come to him when he was neither asleep nor awake, and what is to be understood by the spiritual eyes of the heart?

The earliest clue to an understanding of Movsēs's description is found in the works of St Augustine and Isidore of Seville who defined *three* types of visions: corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual. Isidore further recognized three forms of imaginative prophetic vision, namely dreams, visions while awake, and ecstasy. Thomas Aquinas discussed these in the section on prophecy of his *Summa Theologiae*.

However, that prophecy in which supernatural truth is shown by imaginative vision is diversified first by dreams which occur during sleep and by visions which occur when awake.

In the following question (175) on ecstasy, he provided a further threefold distinction: «The human mind is rapt up by God to contemplate divine truth in three ways». The first was by imaginative comparisons, the second through its effect on the intellect and the third was a contemplation of the divine truth in its essence. As an example of the first of these he referred to the vision of a hand writing on the wall in the Book of Daniel (v. 5), which elsewhere he classified as corporeal¹⁵.

Another medieval indication is found in the visions received by the 14th-century Jewish mystic, Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, some of which are described as having been seen in a state between sleeping and waking¹⁶.

There is further clarification in the works of modern scholars. Thus, the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and a Russian exile, Valentin Tomberg (1900-1973), described, in words surprisingly similar to those used by Movsēs,

a third state apart from sleeping and waking ... which was not merely a condition of dreaming¹⁷.

There were three such states of consciousness, called imaginative, inspirational, and intuitional. In the first of these it was possible to

14. MOVSEŠ Xorenac'i, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, III, 66. Cp. LAZAR P'arpec'i, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, I, 17 (Venice, 1933), pp. 87-109; *Patmut'iun vasn s. Sahakay*, op. cit., pp. 45-67.
15. St THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2æ, questions 173-175, transl. by Roland Potter, vol. 45, «Prophecy and other charisms» (London, 1969), pp. 57, 73, 81, 105-07.
16. Joseph DAN, article «Visions», in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16 (Jerusalem, 1971).
17. «keinen dritten Zustand außer dem Schlafen und Wachen, ... der nicht bloß in Träumen bestand»; Rudolf STEINER, *Zeitgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, Zweiter Teil (Dornach, 1966), p. 189.

receive information from the spiritual world in the form of pictures, and to experience «facts which the spiritual world can communicate to the physical with regard to events in the physical world»¹⁸. In the second, perception was oral, while in the third, a different stage of perception was achieved¹⁹.

Movsēs's description indicates that Mesrop had achieved the condition described as imaginative cognition. This had been common in very ancient times and was still possessed by some people in the early Christian centuries²⁰. Such cognition differed from other visions in that the seer felt himself to be within the picture and not merely an observer of it²¹. It led «to an inner beholding of the matter contemplated»²², or in Movsēs's words «all the details were collected in his mind...».

Imaginative cognition could be achieved through a preparatory period of extensive moral purification followed by meditation and contemplation²³. As described in the Armenian sources, Mesrop had purified himself, in a manner suitable for his time, by living a severely ascetic life as a hermit in the mountains for a number of years. He had endured hunger and thirst, eaten only vegetables, worn sackcloth, slept on the ground and at other times deprived himself of sleep. Shortly before the invention of the alphabet, Mesrop had returned to «his former practice of prayer and vigil and ... austerity»²⁴. A seventh-century work entitled *Emperors of the Romans* (possibly by Anania Shirakatsi) confirms that Mesrop had seen the vision after fasting and prayer²⁵.

Movsēs's further indication that the alphabetic characters had been revealed to Mesrop through «the eyes of the spirit of his heart» recalls St Paul's comment on those who were blind in their heart²⁶. A recent writer has described the heart as the organ for perceiving «the living thoughts of the cosmos»²⁷. Through contemplation, spiritual organs

18. Valentin TOMBERG, *Inner development* (Spring Valley, NY, 1983), p. 48. Tomberg joined the Roman Catholic church during the second world war.

19. Rudolf STEINER, *Karmic relationships*, vol. 5 (London, 1966), p. 70 f.; TOMBERG, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-54.

20. Andrew WELBURN, *The beginnings of Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 116.

21. Rudolf STEINER, *The evolution of consciousness*, 2nd edn (London, 1966), p. 27.

22. TOMBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

23. Rudolf STEINER, *Knowledge of the higher worlds*, sixth edn. (London, 1976), pp. 31-76.

24. KORIUN, *op. cit.*, chapt. 4 and 8, pp. 68, 71 f. Cp. ԼԱԶԱՐ Ք'արեք'ի, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, I, 10 (Venice, p. 37 f.).

25. B. SARGISEAN, *Ananun žamanakagrut'iun* (Venice, 1904), p. 57.

26. *Ephesians*, 4, 18.

27. Sergei O. PROKOFIEFF, *The cycle of the year as a path of initiation leading to an experience of the Christ-Being* (London, 1991), p. 11.

called «eyes of the spirit» could be formed in the neighbourhood of particular bodily organs, of which the most important was the heart. This was associated with logical thought, endurance in the achievement of a goal, and equanimity in failure or success²⁸, all qualities possessed by Mesrop.

Whether or not Mesrop did indeed have such an experience, Movsēs's precise description of the vision indicates that he was aware of the existence of a third state of consciousness. Knowledge of this nature was known to the early church fathers and taught in the philosophical schools. The concept of the «eyes of the heart», for instance, is found in the Hermetic teachings²⁹. Movsēs does not divulge the source of his knowledge but we may conjecture that it was in Alexandria where, he says, he had studied at a *peripatos*, i.e. a school of philosophy³⁰. Although he implies that he had spent his student days in a Christian atmosphere, his teacher, the «new Plato», has been identified as the famous pagan philosopher Hierocles, some of whose pupils were Christians³¹.

EDWARD GULBEKIAN

28. Rudolf STEINER, *Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 129-132, 142 f.

29. Andrew WELBURN, *op. cit.*, p. 187 f.

30. MOVSEŠ Xorenac'i, *Patmut'iun Hayoc'*, III, 62.

31. Edward GULBEKIAN, «Some veiled allusions in Movsēs Khorenatsi's History», *Handes Ams.*, 106 (1992), 1-13.

Ամփոփում

Ո՛Ձ Ի ՔՈՒՆ ԵՒ Ո՛Ձ ՅԱՐԹՆՈՒԹԵԱՆ

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Վաղ միջնադարեան Հայ պատմաբանները կը յայտնեն թէ Հայոց այբուբենի յօրինող Մեսրոպ վարդապետը կարողացած է զայն լրացնել միայն Աստուածային օգնութեամբ: Ըստ Կորիւնին, «Որում պարգեւէր իսկ վիճակ յամենաշնորհող Աստուծոյ. Հայրական չափուն ծնեալ ծնունդս նորոգ եւ սքանչելի՝ սուրբ արիւնք իւրով, եւ նշանագիրս Հայերէն լեզուին»: Մովսէս Նորենացին կ'ընդարձակէ այս տեղեկութիւնը՝ բացատրելով թէ Աստուածային յայտնութիւնը տեղի ունեցած է ոչ իբրեւ երազ քնացած վիճակի մէջ, եւ ոչ իբրեւ տեսիլք արթուն եղած ատեն: Նորենացիին այս բացատրութիւնը խորթ թուած է նոր քննադատներէն ոմանց: Կարծիք յայտնուած է թէ Աստուածային օգնութեան պատմութիւնը Մովսէսին Հնարածն էր, եւ թէ ան կը նուաստացնէր Մեսրոպին գործը: Օրինակ՝ Ա. Մ. Գարազաչեան՝ տեսիլքը վերագրեց «ծերունիի բարեպաշտ միամտութեան»: Այդուամենայնիւ, Մովսէսին տուած մանրամասնութիւնները Համաձայն են միջնադարեան եւ ա՛յլ չրջանի Հեղինակներու գրութեանց: Ի միջի այլոց, եկեղեցւոյ Հայրեր՝ Ս. Օգոստինոսը, Հանրագիտարանի Հեղինակ Իսիդոր Սեւրլացին եւ Ս. Թովմա Աքունացին, կը զանազանեն տարբեր տեսակի տեսիլքներ: Բաղդատելով տեղեկութիւնները, կարելի է եզրակացնել որ Նորենացիի նկարագրութիւնը կը համապատասխանէ «պատմկերաւոր» (imaginative) տեսիլքի: