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## METAPHOR IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN POETRY

### ***Abstract***

The present article is devoted to the use of metaphors in the works of Armenian hymnographers from the 5th to the 8th centuries (Mesrop Mashtots, Sahak Partev, Movses Khorenatsi, Hovhan Mandakuni, Stepannos Syunetsi (I), Komitas Aghtsetsi, Sahak Dzoroporetsi, Hovhan Odznetsi, Barsegh Tchon, Sahakdukht). When describing and praising the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Mother of God, Christian sacred symbols, and saints, the earliest Armenian hymnographers sought to make their language more vivid and impactful. To achieve this, they primarily employed metaphor, the fundamental form of allegory. The spiritual metaphors used in hymns were largely drawn from Biblical texts and their interpretations, gradually evolving and giving rise to original metaphors as well.

This article explores the metaphors employed in 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century Armenian spiritual poetry to depict the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and John the Baptist, including the following: *Light, Source, Ray, Sun, Love, Lover of mankind, Life, Life-Giving Fruit, Fountain of Immortality, Treasure of Life, Bread*

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*of Life, Path, King, Staff, Judge, Physician, Shepherd, Captain, Bridegroom, Church, Vine, Rock, Dove, Heavenly Dew, Bright Heaven, Luminous Cloud, Burning Bush, etc.*

All these metaphors later served as a solid foundation for Grigor Narekatsi's spiritual symbolism.

**Keywords:** *Armenian literature, medieval spiritual poetry, metaphor, Bible, Christ, Mesrop Mashtots, Movses Khorenatsi.*

### **Introduction**

From the Golden Age of Armenian literature (5<sup>th</sup>-century) until the emergence of Grigor Narekatsi (951–1003), the hymn (*sharakan*) was particularly vital in the realm of Armenian spiritual and personal poetry. It is an official-liturgical song-poem with a ritual function, which implies the use of elements of both verbal and musical arts in service of worship.

The first authors of hymns were Mesrop Mashtots (c. 360–440) and Sahak Partev (c. 348–439), the founders of 5<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian national-Christian culture and scholarship. Their lyrical heritage was further enriched by their younger disciples, including Movses Khorenatsi (c. 410 – after 490), Hovhan Mandakuni (d. 490), and Stepanos Syunetsi (d. 735). The work of these figures was continued by the hymnographers of the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly Komitas Aghtsetsi, Barsegh Tchon (7<sup>th</sup> century), Sahak Dzoroporetsi (8<sup>th</sup> century), Hovhan Odznetsi (c. 717–728), and the first Armenian female poet, Sahakdukht (8<sup>th</sup> century).

In describing and praising the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, Christian sacred objects, and saints, the first Armenian hymnographers, striving to make their words more vivid and impactful, employed metaphors – the primary type of allegory.

The spiritual metaphors used in hymns were mainly derived from biblical texts and their interpretations, evolving into various forms and even giving rise to original metaphors.

### ***From Light to Vinedresser***

In the pan-Christian worldview, God is perceived as **Light**. This is one of the main hypostatic and metaphoric representations of the Lord. Moreover, the

spiritual and metaphorical light is embodied by the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son (the Trinity of Light).

“The Lord is my Light”—thus begins the 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm. And the apostle-evangelist John clearly states: “God is light,” “He was the true Light, which gives light to every man coming into the world” (1 John 1:5, John 8:12).

In the earliest examples of Armenian spiritual poetry, the praise of God the Light already exists, as a response to both the pan-Christian and national mythological worldviews.

In the ancient “Glory to God in the highest” hymn included in the Morning Prayer of the Armenian Church, it is stated:

By the Light of your face, we see the Light<sup>1</sup>.

Another notable pan-Christian hymn, included in the Armenian Church's Evening Prayer, begins with the following lines:

Joyous, holy light of the glory of the immortal,  
heavenly, holy, vivifying Father: Jesus Christ.  
Having come to the setting of the sun,  
we have seen this evening light.

The worship of Light is also present in the hymns of the first hymnographers. Mesrop Mashtots, in one of his similar hymns, which is a morning prayer bathed in the light of the divine radiance, addresses Christ, saying:

Light of glory, O God the Word,  
Who has risen among us with the light of knowledge...  
You who dwell in the unreachable light,  
We offer our prayers to You, Lord,  
Let our morning prayer be pleasing to You<sup>2</sup>.

Sahak Partev, praising the inextinguishable Light of the Son of God, which arose from the Father's bosom, also metaphorically refers to Him as the Source of Light – a Source of Light emanating from the Father-God, and the Rays that arise from it.

The Ray of the Glory of the Father God...

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the Book of Hours according to **Zhamagirk'**, 1903.

<sup>2</sup> The source of current and later quotations from the hymns of Mesrop Mashtots and Sahak Partev is: **Mesrop Mashtots, Sahak Partev** 2010.

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The praise of the Light-God and the Son of God emanating from it is also heard in the hymns of Movses Khorenatsi.

...You revealed to us Light in Light,  
and with Your light you filled the universe...

With your sun-like radiance You enlightened the creations,  
We glorify You, the knowable Light!<sup>3</sup>

In one of the hymns by Stepanos Syunetsi, the metaphor of the **“Door leading to Light”** appears, which refers to Christ leading to the embrace of the Light-Father God, guiding towards the Heavenly Kingdom.

Thus, in Armenian individual poetry, the concept of light praising has emerged as one of the important motifs of spiritual poetry.

The metaphorical perception of God's Light has also given rise to the characterization of His Sun.

The worship of the Sun (Ar-Areg, later Mihr) was widespread among the pagan Armenians and remained a significant imprint on the mythological thinking of the Armenian people as an archetype. Some elements of solar worship transitioned into Christianity and found various expressions. Sun-worshipping ritual songs were common in pagan Armenia. In the liturgical practices of the Armenian Church, through the younger disciple of the Sahak-Mesrop school, Gyut Arahezatsi, the songs of sunrise (Arevagal) were also established<sup>4</sup>.

The word **Arev** has been most commonly used in the form of **Aregakn**, which is etymologically explained as “Eye of the Sun,” meaning the eye (or the gaze) of the god Areg (Aramazd)<sup>5</sup>. This is also the case with the Son of God.

In the Gospel of Luke, Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesying the coming of Christ, says: “the rising sun will come to us from heaven” (Luke 1:78). According to the Gospel of Matthew, “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:27). Here, **“lightning”** does not refer to a thunder,

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<sup>3</sup> The source of current and later quotations from the hymns of Movses Khorenatsi, as well as Stepannos Syunetsi and Hovhan Mandakuni, is: **Movses Khorenatsi, Stepanos Syunetsi, Hovhan Mandakuni** 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For the dawn songs of Gyut Arahezatsi, see **Nerses Shnorhali** 2012, 200–203.

<sup>5</sup> According to Hrachya Acharyan, the Persians considered the sun to be the father of the gods, Aramazd, while the Greeks regarded it as the eye of Zeus (see **Acharyan** 1971, 312).

but rather to the Sun as a divine, radiant eye. As we will see, Movses Khorenatsi uses the term **"lightning"** in this sense in one of his hymns.

Once again, responding to both the pan-Christian and national mythological worldviews, the first spiritual hymnographers praised the Sun-Christ. In one of the ancient hymns, the author addresses the Son of God as "The Sun of Righteousness." Similarly, in the hymns of Mashtots, it is said:

The Sun of Righteousness,  
rise in our souls with the light of truth...

The Sun of Righteousness, the Light of Truth,  
Christ the God...

Movses Khorenatsi too, addressing Christ, who emanates from the Light-Father God, says:

From the Father, You have risen to illuminate all creations,  
O Sun of Righteousness!

With the sun-like radiance, You have illuminated all creations,  
We glorify You, knowable Light!

In one of Gyut Arahezatsi's songs of sunrise, it is said:

The light of the Sun has dawned upon the world today...  
In the morning of Light, the morning of peace,  
You praise Christ!

As we can see, Christ here is also metaphorically described as the peaceful Morning, arising from the Light – the dawn of the Light-Father God.

Light and Sun-God are also associated with Fire in the Holy Scriptures. Based on this, Movses Khorenatsi has made the following image: "The Fire, shining brightly, dwelt in the body." This means that the Fire-God, becoming the Radiant Sun, dwelt within (Virgin Mary).

Stepanos Syunetsi has created quite impressive images of the Fire-God, such as:

With the fire of Your Divinity, O Christ,  
You have burned the gates of hell and dissolved death...

For with the fire of Your Divinity, O Christ,  
You have inflamed the whole universe–  
blazing, You have consumed the tyranny of the Enemy.

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Here, the Enemy (elsewhere also called Evil or Slanderer) is a persistent metaphor for the adversary of God, Satan, which has been frequently employed in Armenian spiritual poetry from the very beginning.

In Christian theology, the hypostatic metaphors of the Lord's Light and Fire are accompanied by Love. As the Apostle John says: "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16).

God is Love toward humanity, and thus, the reference is to God's benevolence toward mankind. Hence derives the stable epithet of God as "Lover of mankind," which has also been widely used in Armenian spiritual poetry from the outset. Here are the words of Mesrop Mashtots to the God, the Lover of Mankind:

We bless You, Mankind-loving Lord,  
have mercy on Your creation!

To Your heavenly and benevolent Father,  
we offer praise and glory...

To You alone, O Lover of Mankind, I beseech—  
O abundantly compassionate Lover of Mankind, grant me  
forgiveness of my transgressions.

It should be noted that, according to Christian ethics, man, in response to God's benevolence, must be a lover of God, as Jesus Himself commanded: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

The theological and allegorical depiction of love – God's love and man's love toward Him – was further developed in the later works of Grigor Narekatsi.

God also bears the hypostatic-metaphor of Life, signifying eternal, immortal existence. As the Evangelist John states about the Divine Word, Christ: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4). The same Evangelist, speaking through the words of Jesus, declares: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die," and "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 11:25–26, 6:51).

In early Armenian original and translated liturgical songs, as well as in hymns, Christ is already described with titles and metaphors such as Life-Giver, Fountain of Immortality, Fountain of Life, and similar epithets.

Addressing the Son of God, the Logos (Word), the Son of God, Mesrop Mashtots says:

Thy Word, co-Creator with the Father,  
Redeemer and Life of the human race!

Sahak Partev addressed Christ as "Fountain of Life" and "Treasure of Immortality" in reference to Christ the Life.

Khorenatsi metaphorically referred to the Lord as both "Treasure of Life" and "Life-Giving Fruit," as well as "Life-Giving Fountain." In one hymn, speaking through the lips of the elder Simeon, he proclaimed:

For from the Father of Light, Light and Life has dawned upon us,  
glory to Thy coming, O Lord!

Notably, Stepanos Syunetsi metaphorically depicted Christ as "Life within life," as well as "Life within death." Hovhan Mandakuni employed the "Bread of Life" metaphor from the Gospel.

The Life-Giving Christ is also the Path leading to immortality – another hypostatic metaphor drawn from the Gospels: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Gyut Arahezatsi nearly repeated this Gospel passage verbatim, further describing Christ as the Door to the Heavenly Kingdom – to immortal life.

According to the Christian conception of God, the Lord, endowed with infinite power and all-encompassing cosmic authority, is a radiant, immortal, and mighty King, the King of the Heavenly Kingdom and of the earth.

My King and my God...

The Lord is King forever and ever... (Psalm 5:2)

This characterization of the Psalmist is echoed in various formulations in other books of the Bible and, based on them, also in pan-Christian and Armenian spiritual hymns. The first hymnographers address the Lord as the King of Peace, the King of Kings, the King of Light, the King of Glory. Mesrop Mashtots frequently addressed God as King in his hymns:

Our refuge are You, O Savior, mighty King...  
To You, at the rising of the sun, we lift up our voices,  
O King eternal...

Similar characterizations are also found in the hymns of Sahak Partev and Movses Khorenatsi:

Blessed is the King who has come, the invincible King...

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This is the King who has vanquished death...

In one of his hymns, Stepanos Syunetsi calls Christ:

The blossomed Rod of the root of Jesse.

The rod here is a metaphor for authority and kingship, and accordingly, the hymnographer presents Christ, the King of heaven and earth, as the heir of King David, the son of Jesse, according to the Bible. The King-God has also been depicted metaphorically as a Judge, primarily with the attributes of being formidable and just – an image undoubtedly derived from Christ's judicial role at the time of the Final Judgment. This notion is echoed in the following lines by Mashtots:

When You sit upon Your throne, O mighty Judge,  
when You examine the sons of men  
through the trial of fire,  
have mercy on me, O God!

Movses Khorenatsi also calls the Son of God in his hymns: "Judge of the living and the dead," "Judge who knows the hidden things."

Stepanos Syunetsi also characterizes God as the just and righteous Judge and pleads: "When You sit upon Your throne, have mercy on Your creation!"

In one of the Psalms (the 6th), it is written: "Have mercy upon me, O Lord; for I am weak: O Lord, heal me." This means that God has also been perceived as a Healer. This perception applies especially to the Incarnate Son of God, who, through His many miraculous healings, was seen as the Divine Physician.

The metaphor of the Healer is frequently found in the hymns of Mesrop Mashtots, where the author, likening the sinner suffering from the illness of transgressions or wounded by the arrows of Evil and the Adversary – Satan – to the Divine Physician and Fountain of Healing, implores God:

Heal my afflictions...  
O merciful Father, heal the wounded...

Sahak Partev joins his voice to that of Mesrop Mashtots:

Heal the sickness of my soul!

In the New Testament, Christ is also metaphorically depicted as the Shepherd of the rational flock, while the sinful man is likened to a lost sheep (1

Peter 2:25). In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own, and My own know Me." (John 10:14).

Metaphors of God as the Shepherd of the rational flock and the sinful man as a sheep are also present in the hymns of Mashtots:

I am a sheep of Your rational flock,  
and I trust in You, O Good Shepherd,  
seek me, for I am lost.

The Incarnate Word-God, Christ, has also been envisioned as a Captain, with the prophets, apostles, and church fathers as His subordinate navigators<sup>6</sup>.

In the hymns of Mashtots, metaphorical imagery of the sea and the ship is frequent. In these allegories, the multitude of human sins is depicted as a stormy sea, stirred by the winds of the Adversary—Satan. In this turbulent sea, man is like a ship, tossed by the waves and on the verge of sinking. Yet, in his distress, he entrusts himself to the good and saving Captain:

The sea of my life continually tosses me with its waves,  
The enemy stirs up a new wave against me.  
O Good Captain, be the refuge of my soul...  
In the deep sea of my sins, I am drowning.  
O Good Captain, save me...  
I am near to sinking, help me, O Good Captain,  
for the weight of my sins has become heavy upon me.

In the "Frequent Discourses" attributed to Gregory the Illuminator and considered to be authored by Mesrop Mashtots, there is an allegorical passage featuring the metaphors of captains, ships, seas, and harbors:

"As a wise captain directing the ship of my body through the stormy seas of worldly temptations, casting off the heavy burden of this world's sea, and with the soul soaring, reaching the harbor of peace."<sup>7</sup>

In the New Testament, the term "**bridegroom**" is frequently used as an allusion to Christ. In the Book of Revelation, Christ speaks directly, saying: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come" (Revelation 22:17). The metaphor of the **Bridegroom and Bride**, that is, the husband and wife, according to the Apostle Paul, pertains to Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32).

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<sup>6</sup> See **Nor bargirk'** 2, 407.

<sup>7</sup> See **Matenagirk' hayoc'** 2003, 59.

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The metaphors of Christ as the **Bridegroom** and the **Church as the Bride**, as well as their union, have been widely reflected in Armenian spiritual poetry. In one of his hymns, Sahak Partev says:

Open to us the door of mercy,  
O Heavenly Bridegroom,  
and bring us into the bridal chamber of wisdom.  
Let us come before the Bridegroom,  
and enter into His glorious chamber.

In the early Patristic literature, the Virgin Mary, who bore Christ, was considered the **Church**. Movses Khorenatsi, who initiated Marian hymns in Armenian poetry, frequently referred to the Bride-Church-Virgin Mary. Commenting on the above-mentioned Gospel passage, in one of his hymns, he says:

The Bride of the Church is Christ, the King from heaven.

Hovhannes Mandakuni too, in one of his hymns, addressing the Church as the Bride and the Holy Virgin, says:

Rejoice and be glad, O Church,  
Holy One and Bride of the Heavenly Bridegroom!

The metaphorical union of the Bridegroom and Bride has naturally been understood as a spiritual marriage. Thus, in one of his hymns<sup>8</sup>, the hymnographer of the Cross and the Church, Sahak Dzoraporetsi, praises the Church, calling her the bride adorned with the sign of the golden cross, and depicts the spiritual and heavenly marriage between Christ, the Bridegroom, and the Church-Bride.

For the Church, the holy Bride of Christ,  
is adorned with the Cross, the sign of the Heavenly Bridegroom.  
Rejoice, O Immaculate Bride, beautifully veiled,  
adorn yourself with the garments of glory,  
and go forth to meet the Heavenly Bridegroom.

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<sup>8</sup> The current and later source of the quotations from Sahak Dzoraporetsi and other hymnographers of the 7<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries is: **Orhnerger** 2013.

In the *Sharaknots* (Armenian liturgical hymnals), there is also a similar allegorical joyful bridal hymn attributed to another 7<sup>th</sup>-century hymnographer, Barsegh Tchon. It says:

Rejoice and be glad, O Bride of God, the Church,  
for the Lord of lords has chosen You and has delighted to dwell in  
You...

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus speaks to the disciples, He says: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser... I am the vine, and you are the branches" (John 15:1). According to this, the Heavenly Vinedresser is a metaphor for God the Father (the Creator of the eternal garden of Eden), and the True Vine refers to Christ.

In one of Stepanos Syunetsi's hymns, there is a reference to Christ as the True Vine, as well as a metaphor of the **fruit of the vine**, symbolizing the outcome of Christ's work.

In a hymn by Stepanos Syunetsi, the metaphor of Christ as the True Vine is presented, along with the fruit of the Vine, symbolizing the result of His divine work:

You who were planted on the earth as the True Vine  
and were crushed on the Cross, Your Fruit...

In certain Psalms, the Lord is metaphorically referred to as the **Rock** (Psalm 18:2, 144:1). In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul says: "The Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4)<sup>9</sup>. In ancient Armenian hymns, the Rock is also widely used as a metaphor. In one of Stepanos Syunetsi's hymns, we read:

We have enjoyed from the Rock of life, for the Lord is sweet.

Here, Stepanos Syunetsi has closely followed the biblical line from Moses' blessing: "He made him ride on the heights of the land and eat the produce of the field. He nourished him with honey from the rock and oil from flinty rock" (Deuteronomy 32:13).

In the early medieval spiritual hymns, metaphors for the Holy Spirit, such as the **Dove**, and for Christ, such as the **Lamb**, as well as other biblical metaphors like the **Dew** and the **Heavens**, were also widely used.

From the beginning, Virgin Mary has been depicted and praised through metaphors and attributes of the divine hypostases, as a participant in Christ's

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<sup>9</sup> According to interpretations, the Rock in the Song of Songs, Chapter 2, Verse 14, refers to Christ.

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redemptive work. Movses Khorenatsi not only calls the Holy Virgin the **Mother of Light**, but also refers to her as **Light, Bright Heaven, Illuminated Cloud**, and **Temple of God**.

We have seen that Movses Khorenatsi, the first in the Armenian tradition, regarded Virgin Mary, who embodies the Church, as the Bride of Christ the Bridegroom. He metaphorically named the Bride the **Veil of Light**, the **Veil of the Radiant Dawn**, within which “the Word of Life dwelled,” joined in union with the illumined Temple – the Holy Virgin.

According to the Haygazian New Dictionary, the original meaning of the Armenian word “veil” (*unwquun*) is “the inner chamber of the bride and the bridegroom, the bridal chamber in its entirety”, and metaphorically, it refers to “a new similarity, representing the church and the Holy Virgin.”<sup>10</sup>

In one of his hymns, Sahak Dzoraporetsi also praises the Church using the metaphor of the **bridechamber**.

Movses Khorenatsi further describes Virgin Mary, who bore and gave birth to the Light, Fire, and Sun of God, through the following metaphors:

The Throne of God,  
The Cherubic Throne,  
The Source of endless Light,  
The dwelling place of the fiery Divinity,  
The dwelling place of the life-giving Word,  
The Sanctuary of the Holy Spirit,  
The Origin of the Sun,  
The True Eastern Sun of Righteousness,  
The Pillar of Light,  
The place of the unbearable Light.

The Cloud-Virgin Mary, the Heavenly Dew, has showered the Dew-Christ upon the world:

The Pillar of Light and the Cloud of the Holy Virgin,  
who poured upon us the Heavenly Dew.

Khorenatsi identifies three mysteries in Virgin Mary:

The immaculate conception,  
The immaculate birth,

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<sup>10</sup> See **Nor bargirk'** 1836, 282.

The virginity preserved after childbirth...

Thus, many of Khorenatsi's metaphors regarding Virgin Mary point to her **purity**:

The Immaculate Temple...

The Immaculate Treasure...

The Pure Dove...

In Khorenatsi's hymns, Virgin Mary is also praised through a series of metaphors from the Old Testament, such as:

You, the fleece understood by Gideon...

The wool that Gideon recognized...

You, the Burning Bush, the Rock-born Mountain,

You, the Closed Door, and the Sealed Source...

These metaphors are explained by corresponding biblical passages, which were well-known to Khorenatsi.

**The fleece** and **the wool** are referenced from Psalm 71 (verse 6) and the Book of Judges (6:37–38). The metaphor of the **Burning Bush** is drawn from the Book of Exodus (3:2–4), which describes the bush that carried the fire of God and was not consumed.

In another of Khorenatsi's hymns, he also makes reference to these metaphors:

The living fire, which burned in the bush,

That you harmlessly carried in your womb.

The next metaphor, Rock-born Mountain, from the aforementioned quotation by Khorenatsi, is interpreted as Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Christ without human seed, according to the interpretation of verses 34 and 45 in the second chapter of the Book of Daniel.<sup>11</sup> In another hymn by Khorenatsi, there is also the line "A rock from the mountain, carved without hands." The metaphor of the **Closed Door** is explained in the Book of Ezekiel (44:1–2), meaning a door through which only God can pass. In another hymn, instead of 'closed,' the term 'sealed' is used. Elsewhere, there is also the line "Heavenly Door, which Ezekiel saw." As about the metaphor **Sealed Source**, it refers to the Bride in the Song of Songs (4:12), in which the Holy Virgin is seen as a precursor.

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<sup>11</sup> See **Avedikian** 1814, 69–70.

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Khorenatsi also describes the prophetic vision of the 'pearl-looking' Holy Virgin:

Throne of salvation,  
Source for the thirsty people,  
Exceedingly wonderful Flower – its fragrance blooming in Eden of  
immortality,  
The Way to the Kingdom.

After Movses Khorenatsi, Stepanos Syunetsi, who also contributed to the field of Marian hymnography, repeated and expanded upon his predecessor's metaphors. He, too, likened the Holy Virgin to a cloud—Radiant Cloud, Cloud of protection, Cloud with gentle expressions. It is this Cloud that, according to one of the Christological allegories, "pours out upon us Justice (the Son of God)."

Syunetsi likened the Mother of God also to the spiritual, rational Tablet bearing the divine laws:

Spiritual rational Tablet,  
not intended for the written Mosaic laws!

If Khorenatsi considered the Holy Virgin to be the exceedingly wondrous Flower, blooming in Eden, then Syunetsi likened her to a newly planted Perfumed Garden of Eden, as well as to

The Hall of the Word of God,  
The Heaven-reaching pure gold...

The latter metaphor is derived from the following passage in the prophecy of Zechariah: "a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on top of it, and seven lamps on it" (Zechariah 4:2).

Based on this passage, Barsegh Tchon also praised the Mother of God, saying:

A golden lampstand, shining brightly with the light of seven lamps...

Also noteworthy are the metaphors found in Sahakdukht's hymns dedicated to the Mother of God, which bear a significant influence from Movses Khorenatsi. The poetess also referred to Mary as a **Golden Vessel** and the **Ark of the Testaments**. The latter refers to the biblical Ark of the Covenant, crafted by Moses, where the stone tablets of the divinely given laws were kept, along with the golden vessel filled with manna from heaven (Exodus 16:33).

Sahakdukht also likened Mary, who bestowed the Bread of Life – Christ, to a **Spiritual Field** and a **Radiant Flower**. She further referenced the spiritual

allegory according to which, through the rain showered by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Virgin bore the incarnate Son of God.

Nourished by the rain that flows from the Holy Spirit,  
you bear as fruit the One revealed to mankind by the Father.

As mentioned, following Movses Khorenatsi, Hovhan Mandakuni considered the Church to be the Bride and identified her with Mary, the Mother of God. Mandakuni also likened the Church to the **City of God** and the **Harbor of the Righteous**.

Just as God is Light and Mary is Light, so too is the Church – radiant as the House of the Light-bearing God. Sahak Dzoroporetsi also referred to her as **Queen, Daughter of Zion, New Jerusalem, Precious Rock**, and as the **Luminous Dwelling of the Lord**, where

A divine radiance of Light has shone forth from the Father...

The first hymnographers also glorified the Holy Cross of Christ with numerous metaphors. Stepanos Syunetsi allegorized it as the **life-giving Staff of Power** revealed in the universe. As we have seen, this hymnographer also used the **Staff** metaphor to depict Christ himself.

Syunetsi likened the Cross to **God's heavenly chariot** or **fiery throne**, referring to it as the **Chariot of the Cross** or the **Earthly Chariot**:

You ascended willingly upon the Chariot of the Cross.

You were pleased to ride upon the earthly Chariot...

Sahak Dzoroporetsi depicted the divine holy sign – the Cross – using the following metaphors:

Throne of the Lord,  
Mighty Tower,  
Staff of power,  
Invincible weapon,  
Weapon of victory, sharpened by the blood of the Son of God,  
Seal of triumph,  
Fortress of strength,  
Table of holiness.

For Dzoropoetsi, the Cross is also a radiating, spiritual light: "Adorned with Light from heaven," and also, "A crown adorned with the grace of the revealed Light."

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If, based on the aforementioned passage from Zechariah's prophecy, Stepanos Syunetsi and Barsegh Tchon have metaphorically referred to the Mother of God as the golden Lampstand, then Sahak Dzoroporetsi considered this passage an allegory for the Cross, referring to it as:

A golden Lampstand, illuminated with the light of heaven...

Just as Virgin Mary – the Burning Bush – was not consumed while bearing God, the divine Fire, within her, so too does the God-bearing Cross, in Sahak Dzoroporetsi's depiction, resemble the burning bush that was not consumed.

Since Christ, by dying on the Cross, granted immortal life to humanity, Sahak Dzoroporetsi metaphorically referred to the sanctified Cross as the **Wood of Life**, contrasting it with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose forbidden fruit led to humanity's mortality.

Metaphors are also present in hymns dedicated to saints. For instance, Stepanos Syunetsi used the metaphor of a steed to describe both prophets and apostles. Prophets, as steeds, were sent to proclaim Christ's incarnation, while apostles were sent to announce His resurrection:

You who sent Your steeds – the holy prophets –  
to proclaim Your life-giving dispensation from the Holy Virgin...

You who sent Your steeds – the preachers –  
to announce Your life-giving Resurrection...

Movses Khorenatsi portrayed John the Baptist, the greatest saint of the New Testament, as the **Morning Star** and an **unwavering lamp**, emphasizing his role as the herald and forerunner of the Sun of Righteousness. Similarly, Hovhan Mandakuni referred to this eminent saint as the **Morning Star** and also as the **Lamp of Truth** (with "Truth" being a Gospel-based hypostatic metaphor for Christ)

In his hymns, Hovhan Odznetsi employed profound metaphors to honor key figures of the Christian faith. He depicted Saint Stephen, the first martyr for Christ, with metaphors such as "**Blessed Ray**," "**Forerunner of Goodness**," and "**Immortal Plant of the Intelligible Paradise**." Furthermore, Odznetsi referred to Saints Peter and Paul, the paramount preachers and martyrs of the Christian faith, as "**Pillars of the Church**" and "**Illuminators of the Universe**."

Stepanos Syunetsi referred to the martyrs of faith as the "source of life." Among these are the Holy Hripsimean Martyrs, to whom Komitas Aghtsetsi

dedicated spiritual hymns. Notably, the hymn "Devoted Persons" portrays these self-sacrificing female martyrs as "spotless lambs," "golden censers ignited by the fire of the Holy Spirit," and "sacred stones established on earth." The latter metaphor is derived from Zechariah's prophecy: "As sacred stones sparkled in his land" (Zechariah 9:16, according to the Armenian translation of the Bible).

Just as Virgin Mary has been glorified as the sacred temple of the Son of God, so too have the Hripsimean virgins been exalted as temples of holiness. They are depicted through metaphors as celestial, miraculous monuments established on earth:

Structures from heaven, established on earth,  
and luminous statues, standing in the heavens...

These poetic expressions underscore the profound reverence and sanctity attributed to the Hripsimean virgins within the Christian tradition.

Komitas Aghtsetsi likened the Hripsimean virgins to the wise virgins of the Gospel, who, following their example, awaited the heavenly nuptials to enter the bridal chamber of the immortal Bridegroom. In the hymn "Devoted Persons," there is a notable line containing remarkable metaphors:

Merchants abundant with the unknown pearl...

Here, the Hripsimean virgins are metaphorically depicted as merchants who are abundantly wealthy because they possess the unknown pearl. In medieval understanding, the unknown pearl hidden at the bottom of the sea symbolizes true faith.

Manuk Abeghyan notes that, in religious language, the 'gem' or 'pearl' symbolizes spiritual immortality in the Christian tradition.<sup>12</sup> The metaphor of the pearl of true faith originates from ancient folk traditions.<sup>13</sup>

In the hymn "Devoted Persons," there is a stanza that exemplifies this metaphor:

The branches of the True Vine of Christ,  
Clusters crushed by the celestial Cultivator,  
You have been smashed with asceticism in your winepress,  
That you might rejoice with the cup of immortality.

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<sup>12</sup> **Abeghyan** 1970, 335–336.

<sup>13</sup> One of these traditions was reinterpreted by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century poet Arakel Baghishetsi in his work *"Song of Joasaph"*; see **Arak'el Baghishec'i** 1971, 238–327.

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It was mentioned that in one of his hymns, Stephanos Syunetsi employs metaphors depicting God the Father as the Vinedresser, Christ as the True Vine, and the martyrs – specifically the Hripsimean virgins – as its branches or clusters. In this imagery, the virgins are portrayed as grape clusters pressed in the winepress of their trials, transforming into the joyous, immortal wine of faith. This “winepress” metaphor holds particular significance, as the Hripsimean virgins were martyred near the vineyards of Vagharshapat, symbolizing their spiritual purification through suffering. This metaphor extends to other martyrs and even to Christ's crucifixion, emphasizing the transformative power of sacrifice in Christian theology.

In the hymn by Stepanos Syunetsi, the metaphors of the **winepress** and the **immortal cup of wine** are employed to symbolize the transformative journey of the martyrs through their suffering. The hymn includes the following lines:

Let us celebrate in truth in their winepress,  
drinking from the immortal cup,  
For they dispense healing unto souls and bodies,  
and bestow heavenly gifts upon their beloved.

The **immortal cup of wine** metaphor originates from the Gospel passage where Jesus offers wine to His disciples, symbolizing His blood shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). This imagery is also reflected in the hymns of Sahak Partev dedicated to Holy Thursday, which commemorate the life-giving and immortal cup of Christ's wine-blood.

The metaphor of the **immortal cup of wine** originates from the Gospel narrative where Jesus offers wine to His apostles, symbolizing His blood shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). This imagery is reflected in the hymns of Sahak Partev dedicated to Maundy Thursday, which commemorate Christ's wine-blood as an immortal and life-giving vessel.

In the hymn “Devoted Persons,” the metaphors in the previously mentioned stanzas have already turned into symbols, functioning in an interconnected allegorical context.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, it is evident that the representatives of the 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup>-century Armenian spiritual poetry made extensive use of literary metaphors to describe the Persons of the Holy Trinity, Virgin Mary, as well as John the Baptist. These

metaphors are primarily derived from Biblical texts and their interpretations, gradually evolving over time and giving rise to original expressions. The metaphors utilized in early medieval hymns serve as foundational elements in the development of the spiritual symbolism that Grigor Narekatsi systematically elaborated upon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This culminated in his unprecedented poetry, which is predominantly characterized by symbolic elements.

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## **ՓՈԽԱԲԵՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՎԱՂ ՄԻՋՆԱԴԱՐՅԱՆ ՀԱՅ ԲԱՆԱՍՏԵՂԾՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՄԵՋ**

### **Ամփոփում**

Ոսկեդարից մինչև Գրիգոր Նարեկացու հայտնությունը հայ հոգևոր, անհատական բանաստեղծության բնագավառում կենսունակ է եղել հատկապես

օրհներգը (շարական): Այն պաշտոնական-ծիսական երգ-բանաստեղծություն է՝ իր արարողական գործառնությամբ, ինչը ենթադրում է խոսքարվեստի ու երաժշտարվեստի տարրերի կիրառում՝ պաշտամունքին ի նպաստ:

Օրհներգերի առաջին հեղինակներն են V դարի հայ ազգային-քրիստոնեական մշակույթի և դպրության հիմնադիրներ Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցը և Սահակ Պարթևը: Նրանց երգային ժառանգությունն ըստ ամենայնի համալրել են նրանց կրտսեր աշակերտներ Մովսես Խորենացին, Հովհան Մանդակունին և Ստեփանոս Սյունեցին (1-ին): Վերջիններիս գործն էլ շարունակել են VII–VIII դարերի շարականագիրները, մասնավորապես՝ Կոմիտաս Աղցեցին, Սահակ Ձորոփորեցին, Հովհան Օձնեցին և առաջին հայ բանաստեղծուհի Սահակ-դուխտը:

Առաջին հայ օրհներգուները Սուրբ Երրորդության Անձերին, Աստվածամորը, քրիստոնեական սրբություններն ու սրբերին բնութագրելիս ու գովերգելիս, իրենց խոսքն առավել պատկերավոր և ազդեցիկ դարձնելու ձգտումով, կիրառել են հատկապես այլաբերության հիմնական տեսակը՝ հանդիսացող փոխաբերությունը:

Օրհներգերում կիրառված հոգևոր բնույթի փոխաբերությունները հիմնականում բխել են աստվածաշնչյան գրքերից և դրանց մեկնություններից, տարածվել են և տեղի տվել նաև ինքնաստեղծ փոխաբերությունների:

Հոգևածում ներկայացված են V–VIII դդ. հայ հոգևոր բանաստեղծության մեջ հանդիպող՝ Սուրբ երրորդության Անձերին, Մարիամ Աստվածածնին և Հովհաննես Մկրտչին տրված փոխաբերությունները՝ Լոյս, Աղբիւր, Ճառագայթ, Արեգակ, Սէր, Մարդասէր, Կեանք, Կենարար, Աղբիւր անմահութեան, Գանձ կենաց, կենսատու Պտուղ, Հաց կենաց, Ճանապարհ, Թագաւոր, Գաւազան, Դատաւոր, Բժիշկ, Հովիւ, Նաւապետ, Փեսայ, Եկեղեցի, Մշակ-Այգեգործ, Որթ, Վէմ, Աղանի, Յօղ երկնային, Երկինք պայծառ, Ամպ լուսեղէն, Մորենի անկէզ և այլն:

Բոլոր այս փոխաբերությունները հետագայում կայուն հիմք են հանդիսացել Գրիգոր Նարեկացու հոգևոր խորհրդաբանության համար:

**Քանալի բառեր**՝ հայ գրականություն, միջնադարյան հոգևոր բանաստեղծություն, փոխաբերություն, Աստվածաշունչ, Քրիստոս, Մեսրոպ Մաշտոց, Մովսես Խորենացի: