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## **TEXT, COMMENTARY, TRANSLATION: THE *BOOK OF LAMENTATION* OF GREGORY OF NAREK**

### ***Abstract***

The article studies two most popular translations of the *Book of Lamentation* by St. Gregory of Narek from Grabar (Old Armenian) into Modern Armenian. On the example of Mkrtich Kheranyan's and Vazgen Gevorgyan's translations an attempt is made to study how translators perceive, interpret and reproduce a Medieval work in Modern Armenian, what problems they encounter while translating the text and what solutions they offer. The analysis of these translations not only provides an opportunity to evaluate translators' efforts, but also detect problems and some peculiar features of the translation, which in the future can contribute to the emergence of new, improved translations of the *Book of Lamentation*.

Commentaries facilitate an accurate comprehension of the *Book of Lamentation*, enabling readers to evaluate the work of the translators. Commentaries were produced between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with the objective to facilitate the comprehension of Gregory's work. From an analysis of the translations of the *Book of Lamentation* and the testimonies of the translators, it is evident that in the translation process they have made use of the commentaries, while drawing on their own insights. Furthermore, as the medieval interpreters and subsequently H. Patriarch Nalean and G. Avetikean addressed the interpretation of the original text with a clear objective in mind, we

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have also referred to the analysis of the correlations between the original, its various interpretations and translations.

**Keywords:** *Gregory of Narek, Book of Lamentation, prayer book, problems of the translation, commentary, context, medieval thinking.*

### ***Introduction***

In recent times, the number of translations of the *Book of Lamentation* has increased markedly, yet the study of these translations has been accorded only limited attention. The Eastern Armenian translations of the Book of Lamentation by Mkrtich Kheranyan and Vazgen Gevorgyan have been investigated in a few articles only. The importance of the present research lies in revealing some properties of translation literature, a hitherto little-studied area of translation. The aforementioned translations thoroughly examine the distinctive features of the *Book of Lamentation*, particularly those that are. However, a competence in the source and target languages is far from being sufficient. To achieve successful translations, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the historical context, social norms, and the world in which the author lived and worked.

The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive examination of the aforementioned translations, with a particular focus on the linguistic challenges inherent to the process of translation. Furthermore, it is intended to demonstrate the principles and approaches that will assist future translators in gaining a deeper understanding of the author and presenting their work in a manner that is both comprehensible and accurate. In order to provide a detailed account of the translation process, including text selection, translation, and reproduction, we have drawn upon the insights of the Czech theorist I. Levy in his seminal work, *The Art of Translation*<sup>1</sup>. An examination of the original text through the application of the method of comparative analysis has informed our approach. We have focused on the historical and literary aspects of translations. The following tasks have been set:

a) to examine how translators perceived and reproduced the medieval worldview;

b) to clarify the adequacy of the translations to the original through selected examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Levy 1974.

To circumvent the potential issues that may arise during the translation process, as well as to minimise the likelihood of errors and omissions, researchers have identified a specific sequence of steps that can be employed to create a translation faithful to the original text.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Perception of the text***

The initial stage of the perception of the original begins with reading the text. This presupposes a *reading-preparation*. As has been correctly observed, “reading enables the translator to comprehend the objectives set by the source text and the expectations of the target audience. This understanding facilitates the creation of a translation with no subsequent revisions or retranslation.”<sup>3</sup>

The translators of the *Book of Lamentation* have consistently endeavored to present Gregory’s work in an accurate and intelligible manner. Consequently, they have periodically revised their translation, adopting a different approach each time. It is possible to identify two Eastern Armenian translations of the *Book of Lamentation* produced by V. Gevorgyan. In 1970 and 1979, the translator published a selection of translated passages in a volume entitled *Tsaghkak’agh*.<sup>4</sup> In a published translation, he wrote: “The objective of those translations was to “extract” the original text. However, in addition to that, I aim to enhance the expressive quality of the translation, as well as convey the original author’s thoughts, words, and expressions with greater precision, depth, and clarity to facilitate comprehension from the outset.”<sup>5</sup> A comparison of these two translations with the original text reveals that the translators have employed a variety of techniques in the final version to achieve a closer alignment with the source text and a higher degree of descriptive details:

a) *The initial variant was replaced with a more eloquent one, thereby enhancing the expressiveness of the translation.* Examples of this include the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Komisarov 2002, 57–58.

<sup>3</sup> Alekseeva 2004, 325.

<sup>4</sup> Gevorgyan 1970. The selected passages from *Tsaghkaqagh* are drawn from the 1970 version of Vazgen Gevorgyan’s translation (henceforth, *Tsaghkak’agh*).

<sup>5</sup> Gevorgyan 1979, 653.

«Ի քոցդ **աննուազ գթութեանց**», *Matean*, p. 279<sup>6</sup> ("Your **undiminishing compassion**, *Book*, p. 44)<sup>7</sup> – «**աննվազելի քո ողորմության**», *Tsaghkak'agh*, pp. 37–38 ("**inexhaustible** in your **mercy**") – «**անհատ գթության**», *Gevorgyan*, p. 55 ("**unique mercy**");

«Յորում կոհակաք բազմաք անթիւ **դիմեցմանց** / Տատանեալ հոգիս ի յասմ աշխարհի՝ / Մարմնոյս շինուածով, իբր ի նաակի», *Matean*, p. 339 ("Countless **clashes** with numerous waves beat against my soul held in the frame of my body resembling a sailboat tossed around in this world", *Book*, p. 105) – «**դիմախուժումով**», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("**with high resistance**") – «**ընդդիմախուժմամբ**», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("**with resistance**");

«**Ամբոխեաց** զհանդարտութիւնն, / Ուստի նաւն ի բախմանէ վայրենի ալեացն խորտակեցաւ», *Matean*, p. 340 ("The **calm gave way** to thrice forceful waves, and so the sailboat sank", *Book*, p. 106) – «**վրդովեց** հանդարտութիւնը», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("The calm **was disturbed**") – «**խառնեց-խռովեց** անդորրն հիմնովին», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("...it **stirred-disturbed** the peace to the core")).

b) *The sections were brought closer to the original form:*

«Նմանութեամբ **այսր արինակի** կերպաւորեցոյց» *Matean*, p. 339 ("**With such imagery**", *Book*, p. 105) – «**այսպէս** պատկերեց», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("depicted like this") – «**այս օրինակով** պատկերեց», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("depicted with this example");

«Որ եւ առ իմս հոգեւորական խորտակումն **զուգաձայնել** ոչ է սխալական», *Matean*, p. 339 ("I will not be wrong in drawing **similar analogy** with my spiritual downfall", *Book*, p. 105) – «**համեմատել**», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("**compare**") – «**զուգաձայնել**», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("...**to achieve a parallel sound**");

«**Երեքալեանն** դիմակցութեամբ ամբոխեաց զհանդարտութիւնն», *Matean*, p. 340 ("The calm **gave way to thrice** forceful waves", *Book*, p. 106) –

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<sup>6</sup> **Khacatryan, Poghosyan** 1985. The following excerpts are taken from the original text of the *Book of Lamentation*, as published in 1985 by P. Khachatryan and A. Ghazinyan (henceforth, *Matean*).

<sup>7</sup> **Terian** 2021. The original passages from Gregory of Narek's work also reference their English translations, which are included in A. Teryan's rendition of the *Book of Lamentation* (henceforth, *Book*).

«**եռալեկոծ** դիմահարությամբ», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("**three-wave force**") – «**երեքալյան** դիմահարությամբ», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("**three-wave forceful**").

c) *New words added to the translation:*

«Զոր Եսայիաս մարգարէ զյանկարծադէպ կատարածն, / Որ ի պարսկականն հինից / Երուսաղեմի եւ Սամարիայ **կործանմանն**», *Matean*, p. 339 ("The prophet Isaiah represented the sudden **destruction** of Jerusalem and Samaria by the Persians of old", *Book*, p. 105) – «**անսպասելի** ավերածությունն», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("**sudden** destruction") – «**անսպասելի** կործանումն **անդարձ**», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("**sudden** destruction **irrecoverable**");

«Իմս հոգեւորական խորտակումն», *Matean*, p. 339 ("**With my spiritual downfall**", *Book*, p. 105) – «հոգևոր իմ խորտակման հետ», *Tsaghkak'agh*, p. 57 ("**With my spiritual downfall**") – «հոգևոր **անլուր** իմ խորտակման հետ», *Gevorgyan*, p. 144 ("With my spiritual **unheard** of downfall").

The examination of the translation versions of the same work makes it possible to avoid inaccuracies and omissions in previous translations. Furthermore, as M. Janpoladyan observed, "it allows for an insight into the translator's creative process, enabling the reconstruction of the route traversed by the translated text prior to its final presentation to the reader. Such research demonstrates, through the use of specific examples, the processes and decisions that translators employ in order to arrive at a final outcome. This approach allows for the examination of the translator's artistic vision, their interpretation of the source text, and the creative principles that inform their work."<sup>8</sup>

### *The interpretation of the text*

The original is thus perceived in a way that it reveals the elements of the preexisting preliminary understanding (hereafter, "preunderstanding"<sup>9</sup>) and interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the preunderstanding incorporates the translator's preconceptions ("Vorurteil" – Gadamer's term<sup>11</sup>). These preconceptions, subsequently influence the interpretation of the text. Interpretations assist in accurately perceiving the *Book of Lamentation*, presenting it to the reader, and evaluating the work of the translators. Medieval interpretations of the *Book* were

<sup>8</sup> Janpoladyan 2016, 223

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer 1988, 317–320.

<sup>10</sup> Shirinyan 2000, 36–64.

<sup>11</sup> K'ocharyan 2006, 106–109.

produced in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, interpretations were offered by H. Patriarch Nalean, and G. Avetikean. The allegorical passages of the *Book of Lamentation*, which were expressed identically in the translations, became comprehensible to us thanks to the elucidations provided by the interpreters.

To illustrate, let us consider the phrase **"I took the cup of wrath into my hand"** in Prayer 26 (*Book*, p. 346). Kheranyan and Gevorgyan have translated this as **"I took the cup of wrath into my hand"**<sup>12</sup> and **"I took it as a cup of wrath"** (Gevorgyan, p. 155). The meaning of this line has become clear with the explanation of the medieval commentary: **"I considered myself worthy of death."**<sup>13</sup>

The commentary assisted in comprehending the biblical context and facilitating an accurate translation. However, as I. Levy observed, adhering to the commentary to convey the original meaning can also hinder the adequacy of the translation. It is, therefore, crucial to consider the translator's interpretive stance, as it represents a pivotal aspect of the translation formula, for achieving an accurate understanding of the original text. It is essential to consider the perspective from which the translator approached the commentary and to ascertain whether they selected an appropriate one for their translation.<sup>14</sup>

The term **"label"** used in Prayer 28 is defined as **"unfamiliar, alien, also foreign, as in distant, free"**.<sup>15</sup> However, it is also interpreted as **"name,"**<sup>16</sup> **"need"**, or **"longing."**<sup>17</sup> In the words of Gregory of Narek, the term **"label"** was intended to convey the concept of "longing": "In the context of the divine profound unity, it can be observed that one of the Trinities is not reliant on the other power:"<sup>18</sup> «Քանզի ոչ պիտակ ինչ սոսկ զաւրութեանն ունի զմիսմէն / Առ մի խորհրդականն խորութեան», *Matean*, p. 358 ("In the deep mystery of your unity, one does not need the least power from the other," *Book*, p. 126). This is an illustrative example of a situation in which the meaning of the original text has been entirely transformed in the process of translation. Kheranyan's translation

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<sup>12</sup> Kheranyan 1960, 110. In this study, we have selected and presented excerpts from Kheranyan's translation of the 1960 edition (henceforth, Kheranyan).

<sup>13</sup> MM 5650, 361a.

<sup>14</sup> Levy 1974, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Nor baṛgirk' haykazea lezui 1836–1837.

<sup>16</sup> Nalean 1745, 213.

<sup>17</sup> Avetikean 1827, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Khachatryan and Khazinyan 1985, 1031–1032.

may have been influenced by Avetikyan's interpretation, which understood the text to be about "**longing**." This is evidenced by the following excerpt from Kheranyan's translation: "**For in your deep union / One has no longing for the power of the other**" (Kheranyan, p. 123). Gevorgyan employed both meanings of the word, as evidenced by the following excerpt: "**For in your deep union/ One has no power alien to the other**" (Gevorgyan, p. 174).

### *The reproduction of the text*

The reproduction of the original text presented a significant challenge for translators working with Gregory's work. Not only did they encounter difficulties in identifying suitable equivalents for Narekatsi's words and expressions in a multitude of languages, including Russian, French, English, Italian, and others, but they also faced challenges when translating from Grabar (Old Armenian) to Modern Armenian. This is because of the semantic, and stylistic differences between the two versions of the same language (Grabar and Modern Armenian), which cause difficulties in the translation process. The level of overcoming difficulties when translating between different languages, largely speaking, is the same. Accordingly, as a translation critic, Naida correctly observed that grammatical and cultural differences between the source text and the target text in related or closely related languages are not readily apparent. Hence, this does not imply that fewer challenges arise during the translation process.<sup>19</sup>

To present the *Book of Lamentation* adequately and understandably in Modern Armenian, as well as to avoid errors and create a translation worthy of the original, it is essential to take into account a number of factors. These include **the context** as defined by Komisarov, who states that translations should not only convey the text itself but also the context in which it was created.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, it is of paramount importance for a translator to consider **the period in which the text was created**, and **the writer's intention**.

a) *The concept of a purely literal or dictionary translation* has consistently been a point of contention among translation theorists. Levy also addressed this issue, noting that in translation, the incorrect word is sometimes selected for a given sentence or passage of the text, that can result in a "misunderstanding of

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<sup>19</sup> Nida 2007, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Kommisarov 2002, 62.

reality.”<sup>21</sup> This occurs when the translator disregards the denotation of the word within the source text and relies on the dictionary definition instead, failing to recognise that the dictionary translation does not yet accurately convey the intended meaning. It is of great significance to consider the context when translating the *Book of Lamentation*, as the same word is employed with disparate meanings across different passages. In Prayer 66, the word “**unreachable**” appears in two different contexts: «Առ ի չիջանել անընտրողաբար **յան-ձեռնհասն** բարձրութենէ», *Matean*, p. 507 (“so as not to fall unintentionally from the **unreachable** heights”, *Book*, p. 290).

In the phrase “**unreachable heights**”, the aforementioned word was employed to convey the meanings of “**excellent**” and “**sublime**”. Kheranyan has omitted it, and Gevorgyan has selected the appropriate synonym “unreach” from the available options, which aligns with the intended meaning of the source text, the surrounding context, and the broader lexical range of the work (“To descend unwisely from his height”, Kheranyan, p. 284; “Who will not descend unwisely from his **unreachable** height”, Gevorgyan, p. 398).

Secondly, in the context of “**unending anxiety**” “**unending**” conveys the meaning of “**irremediable** or **impossible**”<sup>22</sup>: «Տե՛ս ի տարակոյս **անձեռնհաս** տազնապիս», *Matean*, p. 507, line 40 (“See the perplexity arising from my **unending anxiety**”, *Book*, p. 290).

Kheranyan expresses “**unending**” in a similar manner, whereas Gevorgyan’s translation is semantic: «Տե՛ս տարակուսական տազնապս **անձեռնհաս**», Kheranyan, p. 284 (“See my **unending** anxiety”) – «Տե՛ս տազնապներն ու տվայտանքներն իմ **անդարմանելի**», Gevorgyan, p. 399 (“See my **irremediable** anxiety and sorrow”).

b) *The process of translation is not merely a relationship between two languages; it is also a relationship between two cultures.* It is unfeasible to attain a complete comprehension of individuals from diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds due to the inherent differences in their thought processes.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is essential to consider the period of the creation of the translated work, for the meanings of words always depend on the context and the environment that shapes one’s mindset. In the *Book of Lamentation*, there are

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<sup>21</sup> Levy 1974, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kommisarov 2002, 71.

words and expressions that are characteristic of medieval thinking and customs and which are, therefore, not readily understandable. Translators have occasionally used the original form of these words. However, as a result, the meanings of these words are incomprehensible to the readers of the translations:

«Անձնամատն», *Matean*, p. 329 (“self-destructive”, *Book*, p. 95) – «անձնամատ», *Kheranyan*, p. 91 (“self-destructive”) – «անձնամատն», *Gevorgyan*, p. 129 (“self-destructive”).

The comprehension of such words and expressions is enhanced when their meaning is elucidated in the translations. Here are some examples: «Վաճառ մերձ ի յառ», *Matean*, p. 435 (“often bought and sold object”, *Book*, p. 212) – «ավարի վաճառք», *Kheranyan*, p. 203 (“easily pilfered goods”) – «ավարառության ենթակա վաճառք», *Gevorgyan*, p. 281 (“easily pilfered goods”), or in some cases, when they have been translated with a contemporary understanding of the word («սերմանի», *Matean*, p. 283 (“mustard seed”, *Book*, p. 47) – «հատիկ», *Kheranyan*, p. 40 (“seed”) – «սերմնահատ», *Gevorgyan*, p. 60 (“a seed cutter”)); // («զողողակ», *Matean* p. 464 (“diver”, *Book*, p. 244) – «սուզակ», *Kheranyan*, p. 237 (“diver”) – «ջրասույզ», *Gevorgyan*, p. 329 (“scuba diver”).

c) In the process of translating such words, it is also essential to consider the author’s intention, as I. Levy observed that the inclusion of an inappropriate word in the author’s system of views may result in a “misunderstanding of intention:”<sup>24</sup> «ընդոտնեա», *Matean*, p. 532 (“Keep under control”, *Book*, p. 321 – «զսպիր», *Kheranyan*, p. 310 (“subdue”) – «նվաճիր, զսպիր», *Gevorgyan*, p. 438 (“restrain, subdue”).

### Conclusions

The *Book of Lamentation* contains a plethora of words and expressions that cannot be fully comprehended without a grasp of Grabar (Old Armenian) and the nuances of Modern Armenian. To ensure successful translations, it is essential that the translators gain an in-depth understanding of the author’s era, way of life, social norms, thought processes, linguistic imagery and symbols, as well as the author’s style, preferences, and intellectual perspective. The accurate and comprehensive reproduction of the *Book of Lamentation* requires that the

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<sup>24</sup> Levy 1974, 58.

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translators draw upon a range of resources, including the Holy Scriptures and dictionaries, while also considering the previous translations and commentaries.

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**ԱՆՈՒՇ ԱՊՐԵՍՅԱՆ**

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ԳՐԻԳՈՐ ՆԱՐԵԿԱՅՈՒ «ՄԱՏԵԱՆ ՈՂԲԵՐԳՈՒԹԵԱՆ»  
ԵՐԿԸ**

**Ամփոփում**

Հոգվածը նվիրված է Գրիգոր Նարեկացու «Մատեան ողբերգութեան» երկի՝ առավել հայտնի երկու աշխարհաբար թարգմանությունների քննությանը: «Մատեան»-ի՝ Մկրտիչ Խերանյանի և Վազգեն Գևորգյանի թարգմանությունների օրինակով փորձ է արվում ուսումնասիրել, թե ինչպես են թարգմանիչներն ընկալել և ժամանակակից հայերենով մեկնաբանել ու վերարտադրել միջնադարյան երկը, ինչ խնդիրներ է բնագիրը դրել թարգմանչի առաջ, և դրանց լուծման ինչ մեթոդներ ու եղանակներ են ընտրվել: Սույն աշխատանքով նշված թարգմանությունների ուսումնասիրությունը հնարավորություն է ընձեռում ինչպես գնահատելու և արժևորելու թարգմանիչների կարևոր ու դժվարին աշխատանքը, այնպես էլ՝ վերհանելու և շեշտելու թարգմանական այն խնդիրներն ու առանձնահատկությունները, որոնք անհրաժեշտ են ապագայում «Մատեան»-ի նոր և ավելի կատարյալ թարգմանություններ ունենալու համար:

«Մատեան»-ը ճիշտ ընկալելու, ընթերցողի առաջ մեկնելու ու թարգմանիչների կատարած աշխատանքը գնահատելու գործում մեծապես օգնում են մեկնությունները: Գրիգոր Նարեկացուն հասկանալու համար XIII–XIX դարերից սկսած ստեղծվել են մեկնությունները: «Մատեան»-ի թարգմանությունների քննությունից, ինչպես նաև թարգմանիչների վկայություններից ակնհայտ է, որ իրենք անդրադարձ են կատարել մեկնություններին, ինչպես նաև ինքնուրույն, հենց թարգմանության ընթացքում յուրովի մեկնություններ իրականացրել: Եվ քանի որ միջնադարյան մեկնիչները և ապա՝ նաև Հ. պատրիարք Նալյանն ու Գ. Ավետիքյանը սկզբունքային նպատակադրու-

թյամբ առաջադրել են բնագրի մեկնության հարցը, հետևաբար մեր քննության մեջ անդրադարձել ենք նաև բնագրի, դրա տարատեսակ մեկնությունների ու թարգմանությունների վերլուծությանը:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Գրիգոր Նարեկացի, «Մատենանոց գրգռություն», բնագիր, թարգմանական խնդիրներ, մեկնություն, համալրություն, միջնադարյան մտածողություն: