

THE SYSTEM OF SPIRITUAL SYMBOLISM IN GRIGOR NAREKATSI'S WORK

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*This work is dedicated to
Abraham Terian,
the erudite and faithful interpreter of St. Grigor Narekatsi*

Continuing the traditions of Armenian spiritual poetry from the 5th to 8th centuries, Grigor Narekatsi (951-1003) developed and employed a systematized spiritual or mystical symbolism in his authored works, including the *Gandzaran* (Book of Litanies, literary - Treasury), the *Book of Lamentations*, and his encomiastic compositions.

Narekatsi's symbolism is rooted, on the one hand, in biblical exegesis and particularly in the Christianized Neoplatonism of Dionysius the Areopagite, with its theology and cosmology of symbols, and, on the other hand, in a national Armenian worldview.

In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs of Solomon*, Narekatsi writes: "What could not be expressed in words, Solomon sought to convey through the allegory of objects."¹ In other words, Solomon sought to convey the ineffable, transcendent, and divine realities through earthly, tangible, and corporeal examples—through allegory. Narekatsi himself aimed to depict such phenomena *symbolically*, in his own words, as "*allegory of essence*."

"Ascribing a dual meaning to every object and phenomenon," writes Narekatsi

scholar Arshaluys Ghazinyan, "Narekatsi expands the scope of symbolic perception and interpretation of reality. In addition to well-known Christian symbols, he turns objects and phenomena drawn from life and nature into symbols—objects which, at first glance, may seem to bear only a secular significance, devoid of allegorical nuance. But of course, this is only a superficial impression."²

According to another scholar, Hrachya Tamrazyan, this "is connected with a key principle of symbolic theology: the essential principle of penetrating and comprehending the divine realm through earthly images and corporeal examples, perceived as signs and symbols."³

In the medieval worldview, the earthly, material world is a reflection—a symbol—of the heavenly, spiritual realm. Consequently, by depicting tangible, earthly objects and phenomena, Narekatsi was at the same time depicting the divine, the allegorical, and the symbolic. This represented a significant advancement in the field of Armenian aesthetic thought and poetry.

1 Մասունագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, Yerevan, 2011, p. 763.

2 Արշալույս Ղազինեան, Գրիգոր Նարեկացի. բանաստեղծական արուեստը (Arshaluys Ghazinyan, Grigor Narekatsi: The Art of Poetry), Antelias, 1995, p. 124.

3 Հրաչեայ Թամրազեան, Գրիգոր Նարեկացին և նորպլատոնականութիւնը (Hrachya Tamrazyan, Grigor Narekatsi and Neoplatonism), Yerevan, 2004, p. 208.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, we can assert that Grigor Narekatsi, by developing the foundations laid by earlier spiritual poetry, established the tradition of Armenian spiritual symbolic poetry.

It is worth noting that both symbolism and allegory served as powerful artistic devices that brought spiritual poetry closer to lived reality and enabled the religious themes and motifs of tradition to be presented to contemporary audiences in a more compelling and emotionally resonant way. In order for the audience of this new poetic discourse to understand earthly images and corporeal examples in a spiritual sense, Narekatsi elucidated and interpreted many of his symbols in his exegetical commentaries on specific biblical texts.

* * *

In the earliest examples of Armenian hymnography, influenced by both pan-Christian and indigenous mythological worldviews, God is perceived as *Light*.

According to the Neoplatonic teachings of Dionysius the Areopagite, which Narekatsi followed, all heavenly and earthly beings and phenomena are emanations of the divine Light of the Godhead (the Holy Trinity), each manifested in differing degrees. The divine Light “enlightens every person coming into the world.”⁴

Accordingly, within Narekatsi’s symbolic system, the hypostasis-metaphor of God as *Light*—frequently employed by earlier hymnographers—occupies a central place. Narekatsi transforms this into a true symbol by

embedding it within a spiritual and allegorical framework.

The *Skizbna loys* (Primal Light) is God the Father, from whom proceeds the Holy Spirit and from whom the Son is begotten:

*Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father....*⁵

*The glorious rising of the sun today was bright....*⁶

Narekatsi envisions and depicts God the Father—the *Light*—as the *Arp’i* (Pan-Universal Light). According to an early cosmological understanding, *Arp’i* is the supreme light, “the luminous Aether above the spheres up to the fiery heavens, the Bearer of the Sun.”⁷ Thus, the *Arp’i*-Father-God is identified with the immaterial, spiritual, transcendent Heaven above the physical sky—Heaven of Heavens—which is none other than the Kingdom of Heaven.

In their highest manifestation, *Aether* and *Air* can be considered synonyms of *Arp’i*. These hypostasis-metaphors of God the Father also become symbols in Narekatsi’s poetry. According to this symbolic theology, the *Begotten*—Christ—is the divine Mystery (*Khorhurd*) of the Aether:

In the parental bosom he was called “the Dawn”....

*With the rising of the sun he came with love.*⁸

The ethereal mystery (borne) upon the very wings of the wind....

*And winds from the four (corners) rise up unto the ethereal realm.*⁹

4 This quotation was made by Arshaluys Ghazinyan, based on manuscript No. 49 of the Matenadaran (Արշալույս Գազինյան, Գրիգոր Նարեկացի. բանաստեղծական արուեստը, p. 85).

5 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek: Annotated Translation of the Odes, Litanies, and Encomia*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016, p. 131.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

7 See also: Նոր բառգիրք Հայկազեան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 1, p. 383.

8 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 17.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

*From that southern mount
a gentle mist showered the lily...¹⁰*

The *Arp'i*-Father God has always and essentially contained within Himself the Son of God, has from the beginning been described in Armenian sacred odes as the *Sun*.

According to Narekatsi's exegetical treatise *Who is That?*, by eye, one should understand God. He also extolled Christ as the *Sun*, addressing Him with various symbols associated with sunlight. Like Sahak Partev, Narekatsi, in his *Book of Lamentations*, also symbolized Christ as the most radiant Ray of the Light-Father God.

Christ, the *Light from Light*, God the Son who proceeds from the *Arp'i*-Father, naturally bears an *Arp'ian* (Pan-Uiniversal Light's) form. In an ode dedicated to the Ascension, it is written:

*Shone of the Father's Light (as) Light of
the World.*

*Light itself was created after his Image,
His Image being imprinted upon the Light;
The material sun being concealed behind
his likeness.¹¹*

This means that the God-Light took upon Himself the image of His creation—human-kind: the imprinted image of the Light, in the likeness of the *Arp'i*-Father God, clothed in a material body.

In Gyut Arahezatsi's (?–478) ode of sunrise, the Sun-Christ is allegorically represented as *Morning*—a synonym of the rising sun. Narekatsi gives this metaphor a symbolic significance, interpreting it as the beginning of a new creation and the dawn of new life brought

forth by Christ. Citing the prophet Job (38:12), as well as following the interpretation of the 5th-century historian Yeghishe, he writes in his aforementioned treatise: "*Morning means Christ... For just as morning dispels the dense darkness of night, so too does the coming of Christ dissolve and consume the night of sin's dense darkness.*"¹²

According to Narekatsi's symbolic theology, Christ—by His rising—is the luminous *Morning*, set against the dark and debased *Night*, which symbolizes the satanic origin and the gloom of sin. In this symbolic context, noon is the solar image that has reached the focal point of the earthly life of the Morning-Son of God.

"*At noon, light and the sun are without shadow,*" writes Narekatsi in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.¹³ In the second ode of the Resurrection, after the dawn of morning, the *Sun-Christ*, experiencing both the zenith and decline of His earthly life, is described thus:

*At noon,
At noon I found him,
(Him) with tender love.¹⁴*

Beyond its literal meaning, the symbol of the newly risen sun—*morning*—also carries the symbolic meaning of *Venus* (the Morning Star; *Aruseak* in Armenian); it is once again a symbol of the rising of the Sun-Christ. Addressing the Virgin Mary in the *Litany for the Assumption of the Most Blessed Holy Bearer of God*, the poet says:

*light leading to the direct light of the
morning
that surrounds you (as) the bright Venus*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹¹ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, pp. 72-73.

¹² Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 887.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 776.

¹⁴ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 58.

*full of light—that reaches the arches of holiness.*¹⁵

Here is the radiant image of the Sun-Son of God, bathed in *Arp'ian* light:

*Beaming down with the rays of the Sun
That light up faces with crimson glow,
Hovering as with wings, like the Sun.*¹⁶

The *Light-Father God* is also *Fire*, manifested especially through the Holy Spirit. He is symbolized as *the ruling Light with fiery tongues*.

Likewise, the *Light-Son of God* is *Fire*. In one ode, He is called *HrArp'i* (Sun the Fire), “*scorching sun*.”¹⁷ And in the *Litany for St. John the Baptist*, it is said that when baptizing Jesus, John is “*the One to whom God’s finger was pointing: the fiery God concealed in a body*.”¹⁸

In an encomium to the Holy Virgin, Christ is symbolized as the *unquenchable Lightning*.

The *Light-Arp'i-Father God*, through the Holy Spirit, is also manifested as a *luminous Cloud*. In numerous Old Testament passages, God appears in this form to His chosen people, the pious descendants of Jacob. This biblical metaphor, conveying the symbolic image of the bosom or embrace of the Father God, is also found in Narekatsi’s works:

*...mighty wind that destroyed the
Egyptians and (became)
covering cloud for the House of Jacob....*¹⁹

*...and covered with luminous cloud the
sons of Jacob....*²⁰

Like the Father, the Son of God is also a *luminous Cloud*. This image appears both in the *Gandzaran* and in the *Book of Lamentations*:

*You, who through your perfection became
for us a cloud of forgiveness,
A (shading) cloud in the summer....*²¹

*The glimmering rays of your cloud of
light....*²²

* * *

In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, alluding to the Evangelist John, Narekatsi writes: “*Love is God, for the name of God is known as Love*.”²³ Christ, who is *Light from Light*, is also *Love from Love*. The poet symbolically portrays the birth of *Love—the Son of God—from the Father-God of Love*. The latter’s *luminous bosom-cloud* is filled with love and moves by the force of that love:

*Flower of the bosom, the Paternal bosom,
He descended from heaven as a cloud,
Showering his love gently upon us.*²⁴

From this love-bearing and love-moving symbolic cloud, divine love drips and rains upon the earth as dew—the dew from the cloud.

The divine life-giving *dew* and *rain* are also present in early medieval odes. However, they are not symbols of divine love, but metaphors bearing different meanings. In contrast,

15 Ibid., p. 150.

16 Ibid., p. 129.

17 Ibid., p. 35.

18 Ibid., p. 66.

19 Ibid., p. 84.

20 Ibid., p. 135.

21 Ibid., p. 23.

22 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*. The Armenian Prayer

Book of St. Gregory of Narek. Bilingual Classical Armenian-English Edition. English Translation and Introduction by Thomas J. Samuelian. Yerevan, 2001, p. 599.

23 Մատենագրիք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 783.

24 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 17.

Narekatsi mobilizes heavenly *dew* and *rain* as metaphors within the framework of divine love:

In the parental bosom he was called "the Dawn";

With the rising of the sun he came with love,

*Being born of the Virgin, the flower of her bosom.*²⁵

The love-bearer cloud of Love-Father God, which gave birth to the Rising-Christ, showers its life-giving dew upon the earth during a symbolic *morning*, from the heights of lofty mountains:

*Love at daybreak,
Love comes streaming at daybreak—
From the crack of dawn...* ²⁶

*Over the heights of steep mountains was a spread of dew.*²⁷

Elsewhere, Christ—the Son of Love, born from this divine dew—is Himself symbolized as that very Dew: "*A (shading) cloud in the summer, who dawned upon us like dewy snow.*"²⁸

In the *Book of Lamentations*, the Son of God is symbolized both as *dew* and its synonym *rain* ("*pure rain, glittering dew*"²⁹).

In Resurrection odes, the crucified Christ is depicted with locks of hair saturated by this life-bearing rain and dew of divine love ("*My hair is full of moisture from the dew*"³⁰).

Christ's curly locks are adorned with pearls and shimmer with the sapphire-like gleam of the heavenly dew-rain:

My hair is sprinkled with light rain, with drops of pearls;

*(My) curls braided with golden beads shine like sapphire.*³¹

In another passage, the life-giving dew dripping from the divine cloud is directly called *sapphire* (Abraham Terian in his translation used the word *bluish* instead of *sapphire*: "*A bluish cloud (hangs) over the Lord's vineyard in Kidron*"³²). The Garden of Kidron here symbolizes the earthly paradise—the Church, suffused with the life-giving dew of divine love and the fire of the Holy Spirit. This divine dew of love gives rise to the Son of Love, and through Him, love permeates the world.

Strikingly, in the *Book of Lamentations*, the radiant dews of the divine Luminous Cloud are identified with the angelic hosts: "*the glimmering rays of your cloud of light, God on high.*"³³

Narekatsi also presents divine love through the symbol of the *sea*. This sea of love first floods the Eastern gate, then completes itself through union with the Western Sea—joined in harmony. And from this expansive sea of love, a gentle southern breeze spreads:

*The southern breezes,
The southern breezes blew
All around there.*³⁴

The *south* too carries symbolic meaning. According to Narekatsi's interpretation, it is the Holy Spirit and its warm wind, which drives away winter.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 219.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁹ St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 45.

³⁰ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 47.

³¹ Ibid., p. 219.

³² Ibid., p. 103.

³³ St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 599.

³⁴ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 57.

In the ode dedicated to the Church, it is said that the sea of love moves by the breath of the Air-God:

*The full spread of the sea rejoices with
calm waves moved
by the wind
Moving toward the Sabaeen isles of
frankincense.³⁵*

Divine love is not only symbolized by the sea but also compared to a *mountain* and a *valley*:

*As a mountain,
As a mountain close to a valley,
Love (rises) for the nephew.³⁶*

The *Nephew* (Brother's Son) is Christ, interpreted from the *Song of Songs*.

Divine Love, embodied in Christ, re-creates the world through the four elements—a Neoplatonic and mystical vision.³⁷

In the final stanzas of the Resurrection Ode, *Love from the Morning*, Narekatsi symbolically depicts the display of Christ's humanity—dying (departing) on the cross and rising again (returning)—as an act of divine love:

*He took delight in an apple,
He took delight in the apple of love;
Rejoicing as he left.
He returned joyously,
He returned, retracing his steps joyously,
Having revealed his love³⁸*

According to Narekatsi's exegesis, Solomon in the *Song of Songs* uses the word *apple* to signify the beauty of good deeds. In the poet's symbolic language, the apple represents divine goodness and love, and also becomes a symbol of Christ Himself—as seen in an ode of praise to the Theotokos.

* * *

In Narekatsi's works, we also find symbols referring to Christ as *Life*. The metaphor of the *Tree of Life*—the wood of Life—is drawn from the Bible. God planted this life-giving tree in the center of Eden and, after depriving Adam of immortality, blocked the way to the tree of life.

Christ, who grants humanity renewed immortality, came to be understood as the Tree of Life—especially based on certain verses in the Book of Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 3:18).

In Narekatsi's *Treasury of Odes*, the Tree of Life is used as a symbol for Christ. This symbolic tree blooms in Holy Sion and within the spiritual garden of the Virgin Mary:

*The Tree of Life has bloomed today in holy
Sion,*

*Emitting its fragrance from there into the
world.³⁹*

*...by setting in you the Tree of Life and of
immortality,*

*to bring forth through you the Fruit of Life
by whom the whole universe is restored.⁴⁰*

As noted earlier, early medieval odes include the metaphor *Bread of Life* for Christ, a synonym of the manna from heaven (Exodus 16:10, 13–14). This Manna-Christ, too, descended from the Cloud-bosom of the Father.

Narekatsi symbolizes Christ—the Bread of Life—as the *Manna of Sweetness*, and expresses the idea that angels, nourished by this symbolic Bread of Life—spiritual Manna—

35 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

37 See Հրաչեայ Թամրազեան, Գրիգոր Նարեկացիին եւ նորալստոնականութիւնը, p. 144.

38 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 59.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

and by inexhaustible knowledge, "we have become sinless and immortal."⁴¹ The same awaits humankind, should it continually be nourished by the Bread of Life—Christ. In the *Book of Lamentations*, the poet refers to this Christ-Bread as "soul-nourishing bread."⁴²

Life-giving is both the *Body* of Christ—as the Bread of Life—and His *Blood*, as the wine of immortality.

When Christ sat with the apostles in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, He distributed to them His body and blood, in the form of bread and wine. These metaphors already appear in the hymnography of Sahak Partev and are symbolically employed in Narekatsi's *Gandzaran* as well.

Come, new people,

Eat, eat of my bread and drink of my wine,

That you may live perpetually, forever,
*eternally*⁴³

In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Narekatsi calls the life-giving wine "a gift among the gifts of God."⁴⁴ In one of his odes, he writes:

They were made to drink of the wine of the
*Father's Wisdom.*⁴⁵

That is to say, Christ's blood-wine embodies the wisdom of the Father God, derived from the crucible of discernment.

Earlier, drawing on the Gospel of John, we saw that the Father is portrayed as the *Gardener*, the *Vinedresser*, and the Son, Christ, as

the *True Vine*. As reflected in the ode by Stepanos Syunetsi, Christ is symbolized both as the *True Vine* and as its fruit—the *Cluster of Grapes*.

Komitas Aghtsetsi, in his ode *Devoted Persons*, expands this symbolism, likening the Hripsimean virgins to a cluster of grapes pressed in the winepress of asceticism, becoming the cup (wine) of immortal joy.

In Narekatsi's own poetry, the *Cluster* symbolizes Christ, and the *Winepress*—the Cross. It is there that the Son of God is crushed, shedding his holy blood as the wine of immortality.

In the interpretive work "Who Is That?", Narekatsi writes that the pagans raised the Cross, and it "became the winepress of the Son of God's blood— they plucked the true cluster and crushed it."⁴⁶

Both in the *Book of Lamentations* and the *Gandzaran*, Christ is symbolized as both *Wine* and *Cup* ("cup of bliss,"⁴⁷ "pure wine for the dejected,"⁴⁸ "New wine (given) today in holy Sion"⁴⁹).

Throughout Narekatsi's odes, there are recurring contrasts between symbols of life and death. According to the Gospel of Matthew (2:11), the Magi presented to the infant Christ gold, frankincense, and myrrh—frankincense being the symbol of life, myrrh the sign of death. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Narekatsi explains frankincense as the fragrance of righteous deeds, myrrh—the sign of mortality.⁵⁰

41 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

42 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 45.

43 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 109.

44 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 783.

45 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 30.

46 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 898.

47 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 45.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

49 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 205.

50 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 794.

In the alternate ode *Dark am I, Beautiful*, written in the spirit of the *Song of Songs*, Narekatsi writes:

Behold her, a heap of myrrh,

*Her scent like nard and frankincense....*⁵¹

*The incense of the Only-begotten of God the Father.*⁵²

Here, the *heap of myrrh* is Christ the Life, who trampled the winepress of the Cross in the fullness of his divinity. This trampled the winepress is a metaphor for the sacrificial act on the Cross, where the life-giving God defeats death and Satan.

The *Mountain of nard* (as well as the flower itself) also symbolizes Christ. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Narekatsi writes: "*Bride speaks—naming Christ as the spikenard.*"⁵³

The *Mountain of frankincense* symbolizes death— "*the death [Christ] bore alone, as the lone warrior who battled for our sake.*"⁵⁴

Frankincense is the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, Christ.

And in Narekatsi's symbolic language, *wood* also takes on the meaning of death—set in contrast with *bread*, the symbol of life: *Wood has been put, put into the bread.*⁵⁵

The symbolic meaning of *wood* in this context stems from the Tree of Knowledge in Eden—the tree that brought death.

Narekatsi, too, in his *Book of Lamentations*, symbolically presents Christ—the Life—as *the Way*:

"*the straight way for the lost*"⁵⁶. In his *Ode for the Ascension*, Narekatsi regarded that Path as the Way leading to the Father God — to the Heavenly Kingdom:

Of the same essence, (needing) no path for his feet to tread.

"As for my being, I am like the Existent, the Unalike;

My properties come from high above the ethereal heaven."

Pointing to the original Image (of God) after which the likeness was fashioned,

*He directed his swift ascent in that path, rising to be with him.*⁵⁷

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In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Narekatsi writes that "*Order came to the earth when it received Christ.*"⁵⁸ That is, the earth—which had been a wilderness before the revelation of Christ—opened up for human dwelling, and nature blossomed with Him. A second, spiritual creation of the world took place. This marks the symbolic new *spring* of humanity—ushered in by the very birth of the Son of God. According to the poet: "*The beauty of spring signifies that it is through Christ that the winter is dispelled.*"⁵⁹

In Narekatsi's symbolic language, *spring* and *morning* are synonyms—just as *winter* and *night* are symbols of death or absence.

In the *Book of Lamentations*, both symbolic morning and spring appear:

51 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 51.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

53 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 779.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 802.

55 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 109.

56 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 223.

57 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 78.

58 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 781.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 787.

*And may the morning rays of the soul's
springtime shine,*

Upon those who await your coming.⁶⁰

In the first ode for the Nativity, too, *morning* is paralleled with miraculous spring:

By morning the dew had descended...⁶¹

*Harbinger of Spring, that wondrous
Spring,*

*In laudable beauty, adorned in variegated
hues.⁶²*

From this *spiritual spring* is born the *song of joy*:

*The lyre resounding a joyous note through
Galilee,*

Springtime joy, a gift to New Sion...⁶³

All the world experiences *revival*, being wholly renewed through the *divine revelation*—the Baptism of Christ.

A joyful message is offered to nature itself—beautified, ordered, and made lush through Christ; and to the flowing, Spirit-filled waters. These symbolic waters hasten to the waters of the Jordan. It is the earthly, material embodiment of the heavenly, luminous and spiritual river—irradiated with divine light:

*The place for the youthful assemblies at
the river bright as day,*

*The glittering heavenly river flowing in
four streams.⁶⁴*

According to Narekatsi's symbolic theology, Christ Himself—born from the Earth-Mother, the Virgin—is the rational Plant, the Tree of Life. And from Him, all trees have blossomed and been made spiritual.

Different trees mentioned by the poet in various contexts carry layered, metaphorical meanings—palm, platane, olive, pomegranate, cypress, hornbeam...

According to the Gospels, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people laid before Him branches of palms and other trees (Matthew 21:8). The offering of palm branches to the one who raised Lazarus from the dead signified *the triumph of life over death*. In the *Ode for the Raising of Lazarus*, Narekatsi adds to the symbolic palms the trees of plane tree and olive as well:

Waving cut branches of palm, of cypress...

*They spread olive branches before his
feet...⁶⁵*

These trees, in essence, symbolize the glory and greatness of Christ. In the same ode, the cypress, symbolizing death, is contrasted with the life-giving dew of God—the life-giving dew that quenches thirst, instead of the cypresses.

As we will see, the pomegranate tree symbolizes the Virgin Mary, while the elm tree is used in allegory to the Church's hornbeam path—*"A cypress she, the mountain cypress; planter for the reedlike Plant; Upright elm for the branching Vine,"⁶⁶* symbolizing a divine, fruitful path through the Church.

The poet depicts Christ, the God of Love—born of the Holy Virgin through the life-giving dew of the love of *Arp'i-Father God*—symbolized as a Flower: *"Flower of the*

⁶⁰ St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 253.

⁶¹ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

fields... ”⁶⁷, “*Being born of the Virgin, the flower of her bosom*”⁶⁸.

The divine *Flower* is called *sea-blossom* because it blooms and unfolds in the ocean of its own divine love.

Narekatsi uses a variety of *flower* types, each also thought to have sprung from the Christ-Flower:

*In the bouquet of mixed roses
colorful blossoms bloomed.*⁶⁹

Here, as we can see, the *Flower* symbol is specifically embodied as the *Rose*. This is understandable, for the rose, as the queen of flowers, has been a symbol in both Eastern and Western mythology, folklore, and literature since ancient times (let us recall the love story of the Rose and the Nightingale).

As Manuk Abeghian writes, the rose has long been associated with love in Armenian culture. In pre-Christian times, it was sacred to the goddess of love, Astghik.⁷⁰

According to the Synaxarion (*Haysmavurk*'), during Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, “The sun, shining in its radiant light, was like a red rose, and after the snow-like appearance, it became white, like a white rose.”⁷¹

The rose symbolizing Christ is also found in other odes of Narekatsi:

*A flower's sojourn in the Virgin's bosom, a
rose's blooming in the Mother's lap.*⁷²

*Roses with petals arranged radially,
Leaves spread out, shining like gold.*⁷³

In the *Feast of Transfiguration*, Christ is symbolized as a gem-like rose, illuminated by the rays of God the Father (the *Arp'i*), from which the *Flower of Love*, the divine Son, unfolds. This is a dazzling poetic image in Armenian poetry, showcasing a brilliant example of theological symbolism:

*The gem-like rose was lit from above,
from the rays of the sun.
Over and above the rays
a sea-blossom was spreading.*

*From the widespread sea
the color of that blossom was bubbling.
The shade of that variegated blossom
was that of fruit glittering on the branch.*⁷⁴

The branch carrying the *Fruit-Rose* of the rose bush (Christ) is Virgin Mary (as in: *a rose blossomed in the Mother's bosom*).

The Flower symbol of Christ is at times made more specific as the Lily (the *Lily of the Valley*), as again found in the *Song of Songs* (2:1). In the commentary of this scriptural book, Narekatsi explains that Christ appears as a “*beautiful flower* (the *Flower of the field*, the *Lily of the valley* – H. B.) in example.”⁷⁵

This same phrase—the *Flower of the field*, the *Lily of the valley*—mentioned in the *Song of Songs*, is repeated with syntactic variation in the Ode for Nativity: *The Lily of the valley, the Flower of the field*.

Like the jewel-like Rose, the Lily-Christ too gleams with gemlike radiance:

67 Ibid., p. 51.

68 Ibid., p. 17.

69 Ibid.

70 Մանուկ Աբեղյան, Երկեր (Manuk Abeghyan, Works), vol. 4, p. 371.

71 Նոր բառգիրք Հայկազնան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 2, p. 722.

72 Abraham Terian, The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek, p. 22.

73 Ibid., p. 5.

74 Abraham Terian, The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek, p. 142.

75 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 781.

*Rays in varied hues,
Conduits of rays in varied hues
(Extend) to the valley of lilies.*⁷⁶

The stem of the lily of the valley shimmered with iridescent light. The *jewel-like Lily* is also associated with the *jewel-like Rose*, in the following equally radiant lines of the *Ode of Transfiguration*:

*Those cypresses and budding firs
took the rose for an adornment to the lily.*

*The lily was shimmering in the vale,
glittering against the sun.*

*By that northern wind
the gem-like lily was fanned;*

*From that southern mount
a gentle mist showered the lily.*⁷⁷

The Lily is filled with the precious dew of divine love, as it is poured forth from the South, embodying the divine warmth of the Holy Spirit.

The *fresh and budded branch* (in Terian's translation: "cypresses and budding firs") that adorns the *Rose-Lily-Christ* is the Virgin Mary. The jewel-bright Lily-Christ has been fanned by the northern (satanic) wind; from the southern mountain, infused with the warmth of the Holy Spirit, the Breath-Father God poured upon the Lily pearl-like drops of divine love.

The *Violet* is another symbol of Christ. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, among other symbolic plants, violets are scattered in His path. According to John Chrysostom, "*The divine and spotless spring adorned the Church with violets, roses, and lilies of the soul.*"⁷⁸ As we

saw, in the *Ode for the Resurrection*, the *Violet* symbolizes the united Holy Trinity.

In the same ode, among the various symbolic plants spread in Christ's path, there are also *rosmarinus* (*hazrevard* in Armenian, literally: *thousand-petaled rose*, in Abraham Terian's translation: "*Queen-roses in dark-violet color, plentiful*"⁷⁹). This flower also signifies Christ, just as the rose does.

Likewise, the *spikenard* mentioned in the *Song of Songs* is another symbol of Christ, as seen in the alternate of the *Ode for Nativity*, where it is referenced together with the emblematic frankincense and myrrh. In the *Song of Songs*, the spikenard is mentioned along with myrrh. In his commentary, Narekatsi writes: "*Also, let the flower be like the spikenard and saffron flower, one is warm, the other one is sweet-smelling.*"⁸⁰

The alternate of the *Ode for Resurrection*, also states: "*Like a young stag he rested, Lying by the saffrons.*"⁸¹ In the *Ode for the Transfiguration*, the mature, glowing Fruit (Christ), like the Rose and the Lily, is also like the *Saffron flower* ("*Of saffron stalks, of fruit nurtured by thick foliage*"⁸²).

Just as in the plant world, certain representatives of the animal world in Narekatsi's work are transformed into symbols of Divinity.

In the Gospel, the *Dove*, which represents the Holy Spirit, symbolizes both purity and the messenger of good news. In Narekatsi's works, it represents both the Holy Spirit ("*they beheld the Spirit in the form of a dove*"⁸³) and the divine nature of Christ. In the *Ode of Treasure of the Holy Cross*, we find lines such as:

⁷⁶ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 52.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142-143.

⁷⁸ Նոր բառգիրք Հայկազեան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 1, p. 206.

⁷⁹ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ Նոր բառգիրք Հայկազեան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 1, p. 807.

⁸¹ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 58.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

*Forecaster of spring and upward flights,
example of your will upheld for the
world.*⁸⁴

Here, the prophetic *Spring* represents Christ, associated with the dove released by Noah. If Noah's dove signaled the salvation of Noah's family from the flood, the dove-Christ, arms outstretched on the cross, announces the salvation of humanity with the new covenant, symbolized by the spring in the poet's imagination.

Narekatsi, commenting on the line from the Book of Job, "*Are you the one that commands the eagle to fly?*" (Job 39:27), wrote, "*The power of Christ's awe-inspiring divinity is like that of a formidable and brave eagle.*"⁸⁵ In the *Ode for the Church*, Christ and His love are symbolized by the sea in which "*Their young flutter in blood over the second sea.*"⁸⁶ The chicks nourished by blood represent the Eagle-Christ's chicks from the Book of Job, symbolizing the apostles and martyrs.

Here is the first couplet of the following alternate of ode:

*The bird, the bird woke up
(and) watching over the Gentiles,
Called out, called out to the dearly beloved
turtledove.*⁸⁷

Here, the Dove again symbolizes Christ.

In the third ode dedicated to the Church, the Dove-Christ is portrayed as a *Peacock*, walking with a dignified gait⁸⁸:

*Of the pleasant fowl, the pleasing manner
of its walk,*

*Its majestic gait as that of a peacock, it is
said...*⁸⁹

One of Christ's evangelical metaphors is the *Lamb* (John 1:29), symbolizing God's sacrificial offering for the salvation of mankind. This is also present in Narekatsi's symbolism:

*the One declared Lamb of God, indeed,
"who takes away the sin of the world."*⁹⁰

*The Manna of Life and the Heavenly
Lamb.*⁹¹

The allegory of Lamb symbolizes the faithful community ("*Holy Sion has appeared in lieu of the ark, for us— people of the rational flock*"⁹²). It is also represented as the flock and the rational sheep.

The bride in the *Song of Songs* says of her nephew-groom: "*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag*" (Song of Songs 2:9).

Regarding the allegorical *Bridegroom-Nephew* referring to Christ, Narekatsi has said almost the same in his odes:

*As a mountain,
As a mountain close to a valley,
Love (rises) for the nephew.*

....
*Like a roe deer,
Like a roe deer he turned around
From the incense-filled mountains.*

84 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

85 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 901.

86 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 102.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

88 Both the dove and the rooster, as well as the peacock, are depicted with various symbolic meanings in Armenian miniature art (see *Մեկնութիւն խորանայ. հետազոտութիւն եւ բնագրեր*,

աշխատասիրութեամբ Վիգեն Դազարեանի, *Commentary on the Altars: Research and Texts*, compiled by Vigen Ghazaryan, Etchmiadzin, 2004, pp. 217-235).

89 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 128.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

*Like a young stag,
Like a young stag he rested,
Lying by the saffrons.*⁹³

According to Narekatsi's interpretation, Christ is compared to a *deer* and a *fawn*, because "*the deer is the destroyer of the serpent, as the Lord is the destroyer of the invisible serpent.*"⁹⁴

In the *Ode for the Holy Cross*, Christ is depicted as a Lion. John the Apostle, in the Book of Revelation (5:5), refers to Christ saying, "*Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has triumphed.*" Narekatsi also draws on ancient Armenian mythological and folklore traditions. The worship of the Sun (Mihr-Mithras) had long been embedded in Armenian mythology. The Lion was a symbol of Sun-Mithras, and this symbol was passed on to the Armenian epic's character Mher the lion-killer.⁹⁵ Just as certain elements of Mithraic worship were absorbed into the Armenian Christian worldview, so too was the lion symbol attributed to the Sun-Christ, the powerful King who vanquished Hell.

In Narekatsi's ode, the Lion-Christ roars from the cross, and its fearsome voice shakes the foundations of Hell:

*I speak of the Lion's roar,
crying on the four-winged cross;
On the four-winged cross crying,
calling to the depths of the earth.
The depths of the earth trembled,
they shook beneath his mighty voice.*⁹⁶

In the original text for "*the depths of the earth*" the word Sandaramet (Spandarament) is used. In Armenian mythology Sandaramet

represents the underworld or the evil spirit that personifies it. In the Middle Ages, it was equated with Hell and the ruler of Hell. The use of the name Sandaramet in mythology further confirms the borrowing of the Lion symbol from Armenian mythological tradition. A secondary piece of evidence for this is also the native prosody, borrowed from folklore, in which the ode is composed. The following two lines of the ode are spoken in the name of Sandaramet:

*This mighty voice I heard
loosens the bonds I'm in.
He longs to loosen my bonds,
to reverse the captivity of the captives.*⁹⁷

The next passage depicts the souls liberated from Hell and the dominion of death by the power of the Lion-Christ:

*They receive the braided wreaths from the
Lion,
the immortal King.*⁹⁸

This wholly symbolic ode itself seems to take the form of a crown—bearing the image of the dread-voiced Lion in the shape of the sun, and composed in a chain-like structure of resonant lines. In the works of Narekatsi, there are also several other symbols of the Divine Son. For example, in the *Book of Lamentations*, He is symbolized by *Covering, Garment, Seat, Decoration, Seal, Refuge, Door, Stairs*, and other symbols:

*indelible seal....
covering most desirable, garment most
protective,
cloak most worthy, ornament most*

93 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 57-58.

94 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 787.

95 See Թովմաս Ավդալբեկեան, Հայագիտական հետազոտութիւններ (Tovmas Avdalbekyan,

Armeniological Studies), Yerevan, 1969, p. 45 and note.

96 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 171.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

*glorious...
great help, trustworthy refuge....⁹⁹
seal of grace for the despised....
a mighty fortress for the stumbling....
the gate to heaven for the doubting,
stairway to for the depraved...¹⁰⁰*

Christ is also symbolized as the Watcher-Observer of the faithful flock. In his *Book of Lamentations* Narekatsi, following the tradition of Mashtots' odes, also represents the Divine Son as both the *Physician* and the *Shepherd*:

*not only the anointed, but also the
shepherd...
not only the healer, but also a
commander...¹⁰¹*

In the same way, the Physician-Christ is also referred to as the *Remedy of the Sick*. Narekatsi, following the Mashtots' odes, depicts earthly sinful life as a stormy sea, and man as a drifting ship, creating unprecedented "seascapes." In one of them, the symbolic Captain-Christ is depicted:

*like a captain in mourning for his ship,
chin in hand, tears streaming down...¹⁰²*

Elsewhere, Christ is symbolized by another image: the luminous *Pearl*.

Narekatsi frequently uses the treasure symbol to denote spiritual wealth. He considers both the Holy Trinity and the Holy Spirit and the Divine Son as treasures:

*Treasure of light, the Son's coequal in
glory...
Treasure of profound goodness, desired,
discovered, and concealed...
Treasure beyond measure and beyond
description...
Treasure beyond corruption, concealed in
holiness,
Treasure ineffable, greatness
concealed...¹⁰³*

We observe that in ancient odes, God, as the supreme ruler of the heavenly Kingdom, is also referred to as the *King*, the *Sovereign*. In Narekatsi's *Gandzaran*, Christ-King is depicted sitting on His celestial throne, which is driven by cherubim, in the heavenly Kingdom, either at the right hand of the Father-King or in the Temple-Church He created:

*The fallen nature he renewed through his
resurrection,
Raising it with himself unto glory,
Seating it on the throne of glory in the
highest realm.¹⁰⁴*

"Forgiving king for the debtor," is stated in the *Book of Lamentations*.¹⁰⁵

99 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 45.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 357.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 189. The compilers of the Armenian academic edition of the *Book of Lamentations* erred in claiming that Narekatsi's allegorical imagery of the sea and the ship "has no literary source." Their interpretation is also incorrect in asserting that the ship represents the poet's body and the helmsman his soul, which laments upon witnessing the destruction of its vessel (see Գրիգոր Նարեկացի, Մասնան հոբերգութեան, աշխատասիրութեանը Պ. Խաչատրեանի եւ Ա. Ղազինեանի, Երևան, 1985, pp.

1012–1013). The helmsman allegorically represents God—both in the odes of Mashtots and in the *Book of Lamentations*. This is clearly evident in lines 50–55 of the same Word, where the Helmsman-Christ is depicted alongside His heavenly hosts (the angels), and where reference is made to His weeping upon seeing His friend Lazarus dead.

103 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 82, 93, 132, 146, 165.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

105 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 223.

The powerful King-Christ is also symbolized as a *Horseman*, battling against Belial-Satan ("The Stallions of the Horseman"). On the symbolic Winepress-cross, not only has the wine-blood of the Divine Son been spilled, but also, through His power, the symbol of death—Enemy-Satan—is crushed:

"I thumped the winepress with the cross,"
he replied,
"I treaded upon the enemy of life."¹⁰⁶

After engaging in the symbolic battle against the satanic forces, achieving victory, and destroying Hell, the mighty King-Christ ascends to Heaven.

It is significant that in the *Book of Lamentations*, the symbols of Christ as both King and Warrior are interconnected:

not only a supporter, but also a
commander,
not only a victor, but also a king....¹⁰⁷

We also observe that in the ode *Dark am I, Beautiful*, Narekatsi presents the infant Christ as a symbol of life through the metaphor of a Frankincense, while in the same ode, he uses the synonymous metaphor of incense, symbolizing Christ as the Only Son of God the Father: "The incense of the Only-begotten of God the Father."¹⁰⁸ Here, the poet uses the symbol of Gold to refer to the King-Father God, considering the metaphorical authority of the word "Behold the Gold for the King!"

In the alternate *Dark am I, Beautiful*, Christ is also symbolized by the *observation mountain*¹⁰⁹, and elsewhere by the *Watchman*

(*The love of that ever-watchful Watchman...*¹¹⁰).

The *observation mountain* and the *Watchman* symbolize the divine paternal view and surveillance over the world, undertaken in love for humanity.

As noted earlier, the metaphor of Christ as the *Rock*—a metaphor taken from Scripture—appears in ancient odes.

In the *Commentary of the Song of Songs*, Narekatsi writes: "The Rock is called Christ, as the apostle says, 'The Rock was Christ himself.'"¹¹¹ This metaphor is integrated into his theological vision. In his odes, inspired from the *Song of Songs*, we read the following:

Return, return Shunammite to the
shelter of the Rock.¹¹²

In the *Ode for the Transfiguration*, there is the following line:

The foliage commended by the harpist—
of which the magnificent David sang.¹¹³

Here, the leaf symbolizes the Giver's (God's) harp, which, in turn, is a symbol of the voice of God and the psalmody that glorifies the Lord.

In the first *Ode for the Raising of Lazarus* and on Palm Sunday, it is said that once, in a land still devoid of humans, the magnificent harp sounded — the voice of God. The refrain of the same ode also features the harp sounding as a triadic tone symbolizing God's voice and His ode of praise, harmonizing with the Holy Trinity:

(Played) the three-stringed lyre, the low
sounding lyre,

¹⁰⁶ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁷ St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 357.

¹⁰⁸ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁹ See *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹¹ Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 789.

¹¹² Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 108.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

*The lyre resounding a joyous note through Galilee.*¹¹⁴

In the *Ode for the Resurrection* (“Love at daybreak”) by depicting the heavens arranged as a circle of Love with allegorical-spiritual luminaries, the poet likens it to the harp symbolizing the voice of God and His ode of praise.

*Could it be that (as it shines) upon a place,
Could it be that (as it shines) upon place
after place,
It spreads out (its rays like strings of) a
harp?*¹¹⁵

It is as if the sound of the harp has echoed in the heavens.

According to my interpretation, the poet alludes to God as the harp who sings psalms in the line from the *Ode for the Fortieth-day Coming of the Lord*:

*Mystery-laden Word, lauded with seven-
stringed lyre.*¹¹⁶

The first ode of the Nativity concludes with the following notable stanza:

*Let us come anew, who have been rejoicing
lately,
Lanterns lit, vestures in plaits.
Let us weave a garland for the bush.*¹¹⁷

In this context, the bush refers to the Virgin Mary as the Rose-Bush who bears the Rose, i.e., Christ. The leaf symbolizes the harp that offers praise to God. Thus, the phrase “*Let us weave a garland for the bush*” carries the meaning: let us offer odes of praise to Christ,

the Rose, and to the Virgin Mary, the Rose-Bearer.

An example of such an ode of praise is the subsequent ode, *Dark am I, Beautiful*, composed on themes drawn from the *Song of Songs*.

In the *Ode for the Transfiguration*, the figure of David—the wondrous psalmist, king, and prophet—is presented as the one who sings to God (the Giver) with the harp-psaltery. According to 1 Samuel 16:23, David performed his songs accompanied by a lyre or harp.¹¹⁸

Regarding the aforementioned line from the *Ode for the Transfiguration*, Manuk Abeghyan states: “*The leaf rustling in the wind—resonant nature in general—is the lyre of God, which is also played by the psalmist-poet. The poet himself, however, is likewise the lyre of God: ‘Let us strive to be a lyre always worthy of spiritual sounds for the Holy Trinity.’ This means that, from the perspective of our Narekatsi, the poet performs the same function as nature. By singing of nature, he plays upon the divine lyre.*”¹¹⁹

* * *

Grigor Narekatsi dedicated to the Virgin Mary a number of litanies, odes, encomiums, an entire chapter of the *Book of Lamentations*, as well as several individual passages.

In accordance with the poet’s symbolic system, the Virgin Marys is depicted as being in close proximity to the Holy Trinity—herself a form of supreme Light. She is the bearer of the Light-Christ, analogous to the solar Father-

114 Ibid., p. 35.

115 Ibid., p. 55.

116 Ibid., p. 21.

117 Ibid., p. 19.

118 According to the *New Haigazian Dictionary*, the term *tavigh* denotes “the ten-stringed lyre of David; the Psalter.” In the same entry, a phrase from one of

the classical authors is cited: “David, sounding the divinely-speaking lyre” (cf. Նոր բառգիրք Հայկազեան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 2, p. 860).

119 Մանուկ Աբեղյան, *Երկեր* (Manuk Abeghyan, Works), vol. 3, pp. 583–584.

God (*Arp'i-Hayr*), and is described as possessing a sublime, angelic gait:

*Close to the superior, Triune Light;
Soaring high with the sun's light.*¹²⁰

Narekatsi further symbolizes the Mother of God as the *Eye of sunbeam-radiance* (*akn arp'iapayl*)—the place of origin for the Sun-Christ.

As with Christ, the poet also represents the Virgin through the symbol of the Morning Star (Venus), as the one who initiates and brings forth the divine Light:

*The One rising in the east,
The name of the One rising in the east
Is "Morning Star."*¹²¹

In the *Book of Lamentations*, the poet likewise refers to the Virgin Mary as "clear as the image of Venus at its height."¹²²

The Morning Star is defined as "that which appears before the setting of the sun, also called the Night-Bearer."¹²³

In the first ode of the Nativity, the Virgin Mary, as the Aruseak, is symbolically presented as the Night-Runner (*Gisheravar*¹²⁴)—that is, the luminous forerunner of the rising of the Sun-Christ (*Arev-K'ristos*). Here, the Virgin Mary is also likened to the Moon, who is filled and completed by the Sun-Christ ("full moon, replete with light"¹²⁵).

In the *Ode for the Resurrection*, the Sun-Christ, speaking from the Cross, addresses His

grieving mother—the Moon, the Virgin Mary—pleading:

*Do not withdraw,
Do not withdraw, O moon,
Adornment of the night....*¹²⁶

In the *Litany for the Assumption of the Most Blessed Holy Bearer of God*, it is likewise stated:

*Mentor to the wise and superior light,
the east for the Sun of Righteousness and
morning for Peace,
full moon, replete with light,
light leading to the direct light of the
morning
that surrounds you (as) the bright
Venus.*¹²⁷

In the encomium dedicated to the Virgin Mary, she is likewise symbolized as the "a sunlit dawn for the Morning Star."¹²⁸ Incidentally, in the same encomium, the Virgin Mary is also represented as the Morning Star of the unveiled dawn.

In the odes of Movses Khorenatsi and Stepanos Syunetsi the metaphor of the Virgin Mary as the *cloud* is present, a metaphor that in Narekatsi's work also acquires symbolic value. Like the Father and the Son of God, the Virgin Mary is likewise a luminous Cloud, dispelling the dark night of sin stirred by Satan ("protective cloud through the night"¹²⁹). In the encomium dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the Holy Virgin is also symbolized as the

¹²⁰ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹²² In his translation of *The Book of Lamentations*, Thomas Samuelian instead of Venus-Aruseak used the sun ("clear as the image of the sun at its height," St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 591).

¹²³ Նոր բարոյիք Հայկազան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 1, p. 374.

¹²⁴ In the *Book of Lamentations*, Narekatsi identifies the Night-Runner as a symbol of Sadayel, elsewhere of Enoch, and of the Apostle Paul.

¹²⁵ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 150.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Cloud that has rained down Christ, the Dew ("a rain-bearing cloud of gentle dew"¹³⁰).

Narekatsi, like Khorenatsi, also regards Mary the Virgin as the *Path that leads to Heaven*—the celestial Kingdom: "gate of heaven."¹³¹ Moreover, descending from Heaven like an angel, the Virgin Mary is the secret Trail of the unknown heavenly way, showered with life-giving dew:

*Radiant, streaking,
Beaconing a secret path
To one unfamiliar with the way.*¹³²

We have also seen that, according to certain biblical books, the Holy Virgin is metaphorically represented as the Fleece. Thus, the Fleece—Virgin Mary receives the divine, life-giving dew-rain, distilled from the symbolically love-stirred Cloud of the Air, who is the Father God:

*Love within a cloud, a cloud moved by love
Pervading that same ethereal fleece,
Bringing down drops of rain.*¹³³

In the *Litany for the Assumption of the Most Blessed Holy Bearer of God*, we likewise read:

*the dew from Hermon to fall on Zion
descended hidden in you.*¹³⁴

The glorification of the New Zion—the Virgin Mary—and, along with her, the fructification of the whole world, takes place in the morning, which symbolizes the rising of the Son of God. At that moment of divine love's dewfall, both the Sun—Christ and the Morning Star—Virgin Mary are illuminated:

*By morning the dew had descended
Upon New Sion, the gentle Sun
Shining around Venus.*¹³⁵

In one of his odes, Narekatsi refers to the Mother of Light, the Virgin Mary, as the Mother of Love. In his view, just as God the Father is Love, so too is the Virgin Mary—who bore the Son of God—Love. In the *Ode for the Fortieth-Day Coming of the Lord*, we find the following lines:

*A yearning from the yearned-for-height of
the Sun,
A yearning for a sojourn in the opposite
direction.*¹³⁶

As will be seen, the Virgin Mary, angel-like in her bearing, stands at the center of Narekatsi's spiritual love poetry.

Like the Son of God, the Virgin Mary is also symbolized in the *Book of Lamentations* as the Tree of Life: *Tree of immortality, guarded by a fiery sword.*¹³⁷

It is also worth noting that in the *Encomium on the Holy Virgin*, Narekatsi symbolizes the Holy Virgin who bore the Apple—the Son of God—as "a heaven-reaching tree for the imperishable Apple."¹³⁸

Movses Khorenatsi and Stepanos Syunetsi refer to Mary as *Flower and Garden*. In Narekatsi's poetry, these metaphors are transformed into full symbolic values. Accordingly, the Virgin Mary becomes the new, spiritual *Paradise—Eden*, restored in Christ:

*he made you the restored lot of fragrant
flowers,*

130 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

133 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

134 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

135 *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

137 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 591.

138 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 158.

*replacing the divinely planted Garden of Eden.*¹³⁹

In that new, spiritual Garden—Paradise, as we have seen, God has planted the Tree of Life—Christ—who is also the life-giving Fruit of that symbolic tree. We also observed that, according to Narekatsi's symbolism, the Virgin Mary is the Branch that bears the Flower—Rose—Christ and the Bush of Rose. In this context, the Virgin Mary is further symbolized as the resting place of Christ, as the blessed Fruit—Christ—borne by the Tree of Life:

*Tree of Life and of immortality,
to bring forth through you the Fruit of Life.*¹⁴⁰

Like Movses Khorenatsi, Narekatsi also addresses the Virgin Mary with the symbol of *Treasure*:

*Treasure beyond corruption, concealed in holiness,
most marvelous and immaculate, adorned with purity.*¹⁴¹

The Incorruptible Treasure—the Virgin Mary, like the Son of God—is the *veiled Majesty*, hidden in Holiness, a profound and ineffable Mystery. Within her is contained another great Mystery: the humanity of Christ.

Narekatsi “unveils” this veiled Treasure of the Virgin Mary with the following vivid image:

*You, the praised, precious gem,
holy Bearer of God, who bore in your womb God the Word.*¹⁴²

The poet further specifies this praised and honorable precious stone:

*O precious Pearl discovered
through inscrutable search in the sea of
this world, holy
Bearer of God.*¹⁴³

Thus, the veiled precious stone—the Virgin Mary—is the praised gem, a precious pearl found from the sea of the world. In the encomium dedicated to the Virgin, she is also symbolized as the pearl of light brought from the sea and symbolized, like the Son of God, as the Fruit descended from the lineage of Jesse, the father of King David: “*The Fruit of the Tree of Jesse's Sweetness.*”

She is also the Cluster-bearing Branch (the branch bearing the cluster of Christ).

Based on a Biblical episode (Genesis 13:18), the Lord's Dwelling—the Mother of God—is depicted with the symbol of the Forest: “*The forest in the words of Moses symbolizes your dwelling of God.*”¹⁴⁴

When the people of Israel, saved from Egyptian captivity, crossed the miraculously parted Red Sea, Moses' sister, the prophetess Miriam, beat her timbrel—unwetted by the sea waters—and praised God (Exodus 15:20). From this comes the symbol of the Unmoistened Drum of the Virgin Mary, which Narekatsi used: “*she who tirelessly played the drum, echoing your immaculate virginity.*”¹⁴⁵

The Theotokos-Church, who bore the Fire-Christ and spread the fragrance of His immortality, is symbolized in the *Ode of the Transfiguration* as a fragrant censer, which, in turn, has three hooks, which symbolize the united human spirit, mind, and body:

*O censer with three lifting hooks
chained together in spirit, mind, and body;*

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁴⁴ In Abraham Terian's translation, this line appears as follows: “*The bush in the words of Moses⁵³ symbolizes your receiving God*” (Ibid., p. 70).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

*through you was the sweet fragrance
spread that filled the
whole universe.*¹⁴⁶

In the *Book of Lamentations*, the poet refers to the heavenly Church–Virgin Mary, who gave birth to the King–Christ, as the heavenly Queen, and in the encomium dedicated to the Virgin Mary, she is called the radiant palace of the immortal King. Here, Narekatsi alludes to the Rock-born Mountain metaphor for the Virgin Mary, derived from Scripture and employed by ancient hymnographers, symbolizing Mary as the mountain bearing the statue — the rock that filled the earth, who gave birth to Christ the Rock.

As in the ancient odes, in Narekatsi's works too, the Virgin Mary is frequently allegorized as both *Temple* and *Sanctuary* (altar):

*sanctuary cleansed for God....*¹⁴⁷

*Sanctuary and haven for the divine
Word....*¹⁴⁸

*temple that held God and altar where God
dwelt,
heavenly built and adorned with light,
where the Holy Trinity is jointly
praised....*¹⁴⁹

*A sanctuary built without hands....*¹⁵⁰

*Indescribable sanctuary, with incredible
brightness....*¹⁵¹

Accordingly, the Virgin Mary is frequently identified with the Church, and especially in the *Ode for the Church*, she is praised in connection with the Church as the Christ-bearing Temple. In a number of odes, both the Holy Virgin and the Church are called the *House of God* and the *Light-bearing Earth*.

Narekatsi has outlined and colorfully adorned the feminine figure of the Church–Virgin Mary, which naturally also bears symbols that reveal her spiritual essence. This is seen in the antiphonal *Ode for the Church* (“Amazing song”) which poetically portrays Theotokos. The encomium to the Church–Virgin Mary begins with the final couplet of the preceding ode in the litany, offering praise of her feminine outward form:

Her sleek eyebrows a pair of arches.

*Star, more than a star; yea, the noontime
hour.*¹⁵²

The delicate eyebrows of the Church–Virgin Mary are metaphorically depicted as the joined arches of a cathedral–church, while her *nechem-areghak* (star-sun) eyes represent the zenith, which, as we have seen, symbolizes the noonday sun-like image of the Son of God, having reached the peak of His earthly life.

The encomium of the Church–Virgin Mary, through praise of her feminine appearance, continues in the alternate ode. By providing corresponding quotations, let us interpret the symbols present in the stanza:

*Her eyes, sea beside sea, widen cheerfully
in the morn,*

*Bright shining like two suns,
Their light beaming down the high
window as of morn.*¹⁵³

The eyes of the Virgin Mary open at dawn, symbolizing the Nativity of Christ, within the divine sea of joyful, blissful love—becoming one with that sea (the eye is the sea).

Here, the heavenly and earthly Churches are also implied, which, as we shall see, are

146 Ibid., p. 150.

147 Ibid., p. 13.

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid., p. 147.

150 Ibid., p. 122.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid., p. 158.

153 Ibid., p. 158-159.

likewise symbolized by seas (the sea of laughing waves).

The eyes of the Virgin Mary also resemble Christ-bearing lightning-like suns. And the symbolic light of Dawn — that is, the divine ray — penetrates inward through the window of the Virgin–Church. This explains the *Shoghakat* – literally: ripped from a ray (of light)–symbol-metaphor of the Church that has received God's light-ray. And this is why the present work, together with the preceding poem, is included in Narekatsi's *Gandzaran* dedicated to the Church:

From her pomegranate-like cheeks,

*laurel-fringed and beautiful, blossoms
flower—*

*Stemming doubly from her heart, which
throbs with vibrant love.*

*Her smooth arms join together in the shape
of an arch.*

She is jubilant, joyous fervor imbuing.¹⁵⁴

The Virgin Mary is symbolized by a glorious laurel crown and the graceful pomegranate tree, whose blossoms are her cheeks, from which, through the stem, like plant sap, divine love flows, gently nourishing her heart.

This symbolic image is paralleled with the *Song of Songs* (4:3, "Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate"). According to Narekatsi's commentary on this verse, inside the symbolic pomegranate peel are gathered hope, love, and faith toward God.

In the third line of the quotation, the delicate, hollow, vault-shaped clasp of the hands again alludes to the arches of the church:

*Her mouth, two rose petals shed on the
lips;*

*Melodiousness of lyre the movement of her
tongue.*

She has a flower at the parting of her hair.

*Its very strands vivid in beautiful color as
of wine,*

*The flock-like tresses an adornment,
adornment like flocks;*

*Braids of triple strands frame her
cheeks.¹⁵⁵*

The Virgin Mary's mouth, "two rose petals shed on the lips," the rose dripping from her lips, and the rose at the parting of her hair allude to Christ-Flower-Rose.

Here is also present the harp, symbolizing the voice and praise of God—which in this case refers to the sweet-voiced speech of the Holy Virgin. In the same work, it is also said: "Its jingle a melodious sound."¹⁵⁶

The Virgin's hair is adorned with the Holy Spirit, and its accompanying beauty is wine-colored—dyed with the wine-blood of Christ.

The three braids gathered around her cheeks, adorned with symbolic decorations, represent the Holy Trinity. In *Gandzaran*, the following verse after this one says that the Virgin Mary–Church is fashioned and wondrously adorned by the Holy Trinity ("Braids of triple strands frame her cheeks"¹⁵⁷):

*Her glowing bosom is strewn with red
roses;*

*Her hands are sprays of purplish violets,
Rising frankincense from a censer
brimming with divine fire.¹⁵⁸*

Here again, the red Rose-Christ is alluded to—in the radiant bosom of the Mother (let us recall the symbol of the Flower in the Bosom

154 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

155 *Ibid.*

156 *Ibid.*

157 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

158 *Ibid.*

of the God-bearer). The violet cluster (bouquet) of the Virgin Mary's purple-colored hands also alludes to the Violet-Christ. Also present is the thurible symbolizing the Virgin-Ecclesia, filled with the Fire-God and releasing the life-giving fragrance of incense and myrrh, emblematic of Christ:

*Her belt of shining silver, with a sheen of gold, has gems all around, Sapphire gems embellished with detailed filigree.*¹⁵⁹

The image of the silver-bright and gold-adorned belt symbolizing the Theotokos also alludes to the church's arch, as well as the heavenly, moonlit dew-like sapphire that decorates it:

*When she moves, with the lustrous beauty of pearls Her footsteps leave luminous spots.*¹⁶⁰

Here operates the Pearl symbol of the Virgin, endowed with the characteristics of a luminous being—shedding light from her footsteps and shining with pearly beauty...

* * *

Narekatsi extensively uses the metaphor of the Bride—the Virgin Mary-Church—and the Bridegroom—Christ. In his *Commentary of the Song of Songs*, based on the epistles of the Apostle Paul, Narekatsi points out that the Bride symbolizes the Church, while the Bridegroom represents Christ: "*The bride and the bridegroom represent the mystery of Christ and the Church.*"¹⁶¹

In another work, *Didactic Discourse*, he further writes: "*For the Bridegroom is Christ, and the Church is called His bride, a virgin*

united to the truth."¹⁶² Thus, the Virgin Mary-Church is the Bride of Christ.

In the *Litany for the Church and the Ark of the Lord*, the poet symbolizes the Virgin Mary-Church as the Bridegroom—the Bride-chamber of Christ.

In the ode known as *The bird, the bird woke up*, as we saw earlier, Christ is symbolized by a *Bird*, calling out to the Church, His beloved Bride, with affection. In Narekatsi's *Commentary of the Song of Songs*, the turtle-dove is considered a sacred, faithful to its mate.¹⁶³ The Bridegroom-Christ calls the Church His Bride in the following lines:

*Return, return Shunammiteto the shelter of the Rock. Come, (come) bride from leopards' mountains, from roes' fields.*¹⁶⁴

The Mountain here symbolizes Christ, and at the end of the ode, Christ invites the people, newly renewed, to the spiritual wedding with the Bride the Church. This wedding symbolizes the sharing of Christ's eternal body (bread) and blood (wine).

Elsewhere, Narekatsi speaks of the Virgin Mary as the Bride of Christ, calling her the *Temple and Bridal chamber*:

The Temple and the Sanctuary of the God of Heaven...

*the secure chamber of the eternal Bridegroom....*¹⁶⁵

*Bridal chamber of the immortal Groom and birthplace of those born of the Father's Word.*¹⁶⁶

Notably, in the alternate ode of Nativity, the following lines appear:

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid.

161 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 765.

162 Ibid., p. 1082.

163 See Ibid., p. 777.

164 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 108.

165 Ibid., p. 308.

166 Ibid., p. 69.

*Behold her, my desirable bride,
Bound to her husband in love.
My nephew resembles the fawns of roes,
The young gazelles
Behold him, my nephew, whose voice,
Exultant, is full of love.
Come my beloved,
Come, my close friend, my bride.*¹⁶⁷

The Bride-Theotokos is depicted here as symbolizing spiritual purity, also represented by the dove's eyes symbolizing Christ ("Her eyes like the dove's"¹⁶⁸). According to Narekatsi's interpretation, the bride from *Song of Song* appears before the Bridegroom with pure eyes, like a dove: "Her eyes of soul, pure as a dove, were shown to the Bridegroom."¹⁶⁹

Let us also bring forth the following verse from the song:

*Behold her teasing: "Cover me with apples,
Take me to the winery."*¹⁷⁰

Let us remember that the apple, according to Narekatsi's symbolism, represents divine goodness and love. The winehouse or house of wine, borrowed from the *Song of Songs* (2:4), according to Narekatsi's interpretation, signifies "the house of virtues,"¹⁷¹ as the blood of Christ, which carries the highest goodness, is symbolized by wine, which "calls those blessed by God's gift."¹⁷² Thus, the winehouse is also a symbol of the Church as the house of God's goodness.

Here is Christ, the Nephew, in the *Ode for Resurrection*, expressing His great, divine love for His Bride, the Church:

*As a mountain,
As a mountain close to a valley,
Love (rises) for the nephew.*¹⁷³

And this great love pierces the soul of the Bride-Virgin Mary-Church: "a wounded soul loved by the Groom."¹⁷⁴

According to the interpretation of the first ode of the Nativity, the Virgin Mary-Church and the Bridegroom-Christ, united in a new wedding, bring a beautiful and colorful spring, working miracles in the spring.

Christ, the Bridegroom, by uniting with the Virgin Mary-Church in the spiritual, allegorical wedding, establishes her eternal order and multiple yet unified, universal image. This is explicitly stated in the Church's litany:

*....the heavenly Groom established with
inexpressible mystery and amid profound
joy
your immutable canons,
(your) many parts in the likeness of the
pattern,
a reflection of the whole universe—
in the likeness of (these) manifold things is
the cathedral edifice....*¹⁷⁵

The heavenly wedding of Christ, the Bridegroom, is also referenced in the *Book of Lamentations*:

*I pine not so much for the bridal feast,
as for the distress of the groom....*¹⁷⁶

* * *

Besides the association of the Bride and Virgin Mary, Narekatsi also employs other symbols of the Church, such as the sacred site,

167 Ibid., p. 50-51.

168 Ibid., p. 51.

169 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 780.

170 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 51.

171 Մատենագիրք Հայոց (Armenian Historians), vol. 12, p. 783.

172 Ibid.

173 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 57.

174 Ibid., p. 95.

175 Ibid., p. 97.

176 St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 105.

meaning a place created, well-constructed by God's goodness. It also symbolizes the song "*Amazing song, ardently moving song.*" This represents the heavenly Church as the voice of God and the praise of the angels, which sounds through them, as seen in the following verse from the litany: "*Her eyes, sea beside sea, widen cheerfully in the morn.*"¹⁷⁷

The song—the heavenly Church—stands in contrast to the earthly Church. The poet views the Church as a Mystery, which has its liturgical meanings, and these meanings are its adornments:

*The flock-like tresses an adornment,
adornment like flocks....*¹⁷⁸

The liturgical gifts of the Church, endowed by the Holy Spirit, are called by Narekatsi "*The stones therein with seven eyes (as) those of doves.*"¹⁷⁹

In the same song, it is said: "*(The Spirit) pours out that beautiful flow of myrrh upon you.*"¹⁸⁰ Here, the myrrh symbolizes the spiritual fragrance of the Virgin Mary.

According to Narekatsi's theology, the Church has two forms: celestial and earthly. As the site of Divinity, it has existed from the very beginning, before time and movement, and then by the divine word (the Logos), it was formed, created with goodness and wisdom within time, by the will of the Father, *Arp'i-Ether*.

* * *

The hypostasis-symbol of God the Father and the dwelling place of Divinity is Ether-Heaven, the celestial altar-Church. "*Your altar extends beyond its space—into the inaccessible ether.*"¹⁸¹ It is eternally separated from humanity, yet it is always within their souls.

In the *Book of Lamentations*, the Heavenly Church is also depicted as an inaccessible distant and yet continuously close entity (Prayer 23).

The Heavenly Church, which is the song that carries God's voice and His praise, adorned by the Holy Trinity, has descended from heaven to earth, clothed in the radiant splendor of gold, and has become the sacred site of creation.

Based on a prophecy by Isaiah (Isaiah 66:1), Narekatsi considered the Heavenly Church as God's throne, while the earthly Church as His pedestal. Therefore, the Church is both heaven and earth:

*Heaven on earth and earth in heaven,
Descent into depths and ascent unto heights,
New heaven, heaven adorned with the Sun's Light
The good news from above spread on earth.*¹⁸²

Elsewhere, the Church is called *Heaven, established on earth*.

According to the poet's symbolism, the Heavenly and Earthly Churches are two seas, nourished by the heavenly prototype of the Eden's four rivers:

*From where the fourfold river gushes forth,
Flowing, streaming down into the first sea;
Winding down, spreading out, (rushing)
into the next.*¹⁸³

The first sea is the Heavenly Church, the Holy Trinity. According to Narekatsi's explanation, "sea" refers to the three majestic persons.

177 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 158.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

179 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

180 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

181 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

182 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

183 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

In the first sea, the doves, symbols of the Holy Spirit, hover. The second sea is the earthly Church, the incarnate Love of the Son of God, where, as we have noted, the Eagle-Christ's offspring (descendants) are nourished by His blood. And both of these seas move by the breath of the Air-Father God.

The poet, based on certain biblical books, has also symbolized the Church as the *Abraham's tent*, *Aaronic tabernacle*, and, as with Christ and His beloved disciple, Peter, the *cornerstone of faith* is also symbolized by the foundation:

*for you have established her firmly upon
the cornerstone of faith,
a (splendid) tower, beyond
imagination...¹⁸⁴*

The ecclesiastical sacraments, bearing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are also called by Narekatsi *the seven cornerstones* as we have seen.

Hovhan Mandakuni metaphorically describes the Church as the City of God. In Narekatsi's symbolism, the cornerstone-Church, established in the world by Christ and His apostles, is the unassailable Cross-shaped City:

*You who are above the cherubic arch, the
watchtower of the four-faced beings,
and are worshiped by the full circle of the
angelic kind,*

*O Triune essence
who willed to establish this rock at the
hands of the holy apostles,
an impregnable city by (your) deliberate
miracles,
foursquare, in the midst of the universe.¹⁸⁵*

* * *

The Holy Cross is also symbolized by Narekatsi as an incomprehensible treasure and hidden greatness, and is also called the path of luminous glory, stained with the Creator's blood. As with the crucified Christ, the Cross is also, in Narekatsi's symbolism, the Watchman and the Watchtower, from which the world is observed and overseen by the Son of God:

*I am ascending to my watch(tower),
To my watchtower, to watch the One
coming from the south....¹⁸⁶*

The south symbolizes the warmth of the Holy Spirit, in contrast to the "northern wind" (the satanic cold breeze) and winter.

Narekatsi dedicates a unique litany and odes to the great Evangelical Saint John the Baptist. Furthermore, the poet also refers to this saint in the ode of Christ's Baptism, and, as usual, mentions him after the Theotokos in his final litanies.

John the Baptist, the precursor of the Son of God, is also symbolized by Narekatsi as the Morning Star, as the one who announces the divine light. The Morning Star-John is also the unclouded ray of the righteous Sun-Christ:

*Bright Venus and a ray that cannot be
hidden,
pathway to the Sun of Righteousness...¹⁸⁷*

Narekatsi has also praised John the Baptist using the symbols of the Flower, Lily, and Shoot:

*Pretty flower of the valleys
and lily of the pleasant plains....¹⁸⁸*

In the basis of the *Song of Songs*, John the Baptist is also represented by the dove symbol:

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

*Sweet cooing of the turtledove, fulfilling
the prediction made by the spiritual
singer.*

*(Like) a bright morning you roused our
indolent nature,
made lethargic through the dullness of the
night.¹⁸⁹*

Since the dove symbolizes the herald of the dawn and the new life beginning with Christ, it is synonymous with John the Baptist as the Morning Star.

In the symbolic battle against Satan led by Christ, the holy front-runners are also participants. Among them is John the Baptist, the first warrior, whom Narekatsi calls "*foot-soldier of the immortal King.*"¹⁹⁰

John the Baptist's metaphor of the Evangelical Ax (Matthew 3:10) is used by the poet in this context: "*Watcher for the One who is (both) true and a newly laid ax to cut down unbelief.*"¹⁹¹ This means: you are the true guardian of God, and His ax is the destroyer of unbelief.

The girdle that the saint wore is also mentioned as a treasure, symbolizing his readiness to die for the Lord:

*(and) wore a leather belt which symbolizes
willingness to die....¹⁹²*

According to the Gospel passage "*He that hath the bride is the bridegroom*" (John 3:29), John the Baptist is considered the inviter to the heavenly, allegorical wedding of the *Bridegroom of Christ* and the *Bride of the Church*.

In the work *Instruction on the Orthodox Faith and Virtuous and Pure Life* Narekatsi

writes: "*The bride is united with the Word purely, just as the bridegroom, John, says.*"¹⁹³

In the *Litany for St. John the Baptist* the saint is referred to as the *Bridegroom* and the advancing *Forerunner*:

*the friend who attended the Bridegroom
and became
forerunner of the One who brought
salvation to the world....¹⁹⁴*

In the *Ode for the Blessing of Water*, the herald of the allegorical wedding, invites everyone:

*Good news to me, the summoner
of the pure bride of the holy Groom.*

*I am the proclaimer of the good news:
stay not away from the wedding.¹⁹⁵*

By the divine light, the apostles are also the bearers of this light, spreading it throughout the world. Therefore, the poet considers them to be the symbolic rays of Light-Christ, through which "*Rays of light enveloped the earth.*"¹⁹⁶

The apostles are also symbolized as the light of the universe, the luminous bodies of the universe, the shining light, and even as stars:

*as we are gathered together in memory of
your chosen,
holy apostles
whom you placed as luminaries to traverse
the sky with the stars,*

189 Ibid., p. 64.

190 Ibid., p. 63.

191 Ibid., p. 64.

192 Ibid.

193 Ա. Գրիգոր Նարեկացի, Ծառք եւ խոստովանութիւնք հաւատոյ (Discourses and

Confessions of Faith), Ի Տպարանի Սրբոց Յակովբեանց, 1856, p. 112.

194 Abraham Terian, The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek, p. 63.

195 Ibid., p. 6.

196 Ibid., p. 206.

*whom you formed in word and deed on earth.*¹⁹⁷

For the apostles, who carried the light of Christian faith, Narekatsi considered them treasures, as the treasure of the glory of the self-originating Light-Christ:

*Treasure of the glorious mystery of the self-generated Light....*¹⁹⁸

The apostles are also, symbolic trees and flowers that have sprouted and blossomed from the Tree of Life and the gem-like Rose-Christ. They are alluded to in the following lines of the *Ode for the Transfiguration*:

In the bouquet of mixed roses colorful blossoms bloomed.

Those poplars and box trees shot pink branches;

*.... All the blossoms were wet with dew....*¹⁹⁹

The poet also alludes to the apostles (and martyrs) in the line from the second *Ode of the Resurrection*: "*For the Wood from the forest.*"²⁰⁰ The good news of the world's second creation is also addressed to the trees and flowers – apostles, who likewise played a significant role in the divine miracle of the world's spiritualization:

*Good news to trees, blossoms,
(Plants) in full bloom, leafy branches....*²⁰¹

In the *Encomium on the Holy Apostles*, Narekatsi likewise symbolized them as flowers gifted by Dew-Christ, as many-branched and tall trees, and as chosen seeds:

O universal flowers and desirable plants of the Edenic home.... tall trees, heaven-bound (and) fragrant, (with) far-reaching

*boughs.... choice seed of the fruitful orchard.*²⁰²

They are also symbolized as the sweet-flavored Vine-Christ's fruitful and growing branches. In the *Litany for All the Holy Apostles*, these symbols are also present:

*Miraculous boughs cultivated and made to bloom by the Existent,
fruitful branches of the Vine, cleansed by the penetrating Light....*²⁰³

In the *Litany for All the Holy Apostles* it is depicted how the apostles, in the immortal garden of the Upper Room, communed with the wine-blood of the crushed Vine-Christ on the cross:

and in the upper room you drank the cup of immortality

*from the hand of the One most high....*²⁰⁴

The apostles offered this immortal cup to all mankind, thus becoming divine immortalizing wine-bearers: "*cupbearers who served the deadly cup....*"²⁰⁵

Narekatsi also considered the apostles as riders of *Warrior and Rider of Christ*. In an encomium dedicated to them, it is said that these creative riders, through the Word-Christ's strength, have restrained the Dragon-Satan: "*like horses of the creative Word they galloped over the turbulent waves; they restrained the rebellious dragon with the mighty reins of the Word.*"²⁰⁶

According to Narekatsi's symbolism, the apostles are also the winnowing forks of the Son of God who fought the symbolic war against Satan. This tool has been used to sepa-

197 Ibid., p. 178.

198 Ibid., p. 173.

199 Ibid., p. 143-144.

200 Ibid., p. 57.

201 Ibid., p. 5.

202 Ibid., p. 326.

203 Ibid., p. 175.

204 Ibid., p. 174.

205 Ibid., p. 62.

206 Ibid., p. 340.

rate wheat from chaff, symbolizing the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous (the apostles' role in the great Judgment). Christ has also employed His apostles as weapons to strike down Satan:

*They became vehicles and winnowing forks for the One who struck Beliar....*²⁰⁷

The apostles are also symbolized as a *spiritual river*, which springs from the divine love of the sea and irrigates the world:

*Thus, you were made into streams from the boundless sea (of heaven), like the four rivers of Eden, to flow even more, into the vast expanse, founding the City of God, the church, the dwelling place of the Most High, to give drink to the thirsty and to make them glad.*²⁰⁸

The river symbol of the apostles is also present in the *Book of Lamentations*: "*the glorified choir, the spiritual rivers.*"²⁰⁹

In the ode dedicated to the apostles, they are symbolized both as a calm and expansive river, beautiful and cheerful, and as a flowing stream. Elsewhere, they are called "*the salt seasoning,*" "*the salt of purity*" according to the Gospel (Matthew, 5:13).

* * *

Both in the *Book of Lamentations* and *Gandzaran*, Narekatsi also refers to the apostles' martyr followers. These holy witnesses are also allies of Christ in the symbolic war against Satan:

Bands of holy confessors in that terrifying combat

arrived accomplished in their utmost calling on earth....

They embraced the sleep of death, its bitter sweat, mixing their tears with their rosy blood.

They pleaded earnestly for (divine) mercy in their plight, entreating (him) at the height of their suffering.... ²¹⁰

Just as Jesus, on His symbolic harvest-cross, shed His wine-blood to defeat Satan, so His martyrs, descending into the vineyard in Kidron symbolizing holy faith, with their deaths, overcame Satan's followers, mixing their blood with the immortal wine-blood of the Son of God.

This martyrdom is symbolized in the ode known as "The Bird, the Bird Woke up" as the sacrifice and victory of the martyrs:

Treading the winepress, the winepress filled with color as from Bozrah.

Wood has been put, put into the bread, his sacrificial offering ²¹¹

According to Narekatsi, the driving force for the martyrs sacrificing for Christ is divine love, injected into them through the apostles' wine-blood cup.

Narekatsi also symbolized the martyrs, the followers of the apostles, as the "*bones of the Lord's body.*" This may refer to a passage in Cyril of Alexandria's interpretation of Luke's Gospel, where he mentions Satan and who "*terrified by the holy martyrs' bones, flees and is lost.*"²¹²

The chicks nourished by the blood of the Eagle-Son of God, as alluded to in the odes of

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁰⁹ St. Gregor Narekats'i, *Speaking with God from the Depth of the Heart*, p. 603.

²¹⁰ Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 26.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²¹² Նոր բարձիրը Հայկազեան լեզուի (New Dictionary of the Armenian Language), vol. 2, p. 521.

the Church and the Ark, according to Narekatsi's symbolism, represent the apostles and the "community of martyrs."

In the *Ode for the Transfiguration*, the pink branches of the poplars and box trees symbolizing the apostles are also the martyrs—dyed in their own rose-colored blood. They are also blood-drenched flowers sprung from the blossom-Apostles, who, like the Rose-Christ:

*With gold-like and fire-like blood were
their members stained, withered like
roses....*²¹³

As the light of the Son of God shines through the apostles, so too do the martyrs emerge from the apostles, becoming witnesses of Christ's sacrifice. They are also symbolized as stars: "...luminaries in glory, those blazing in heaven."²¹⁴

Thus, God created the world as a celestial structure, where the all-encompassing Ether-*Arp'i*-Father God reigns, with the radiant Sun-Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Moon, and the stars of apostles and martyrs shining around:

*The moon, coming to its fullness of light,
With the gracefully gliding evening star
Brought bright stars in its train.*²¹⁵

*The stars, one and all, formed a circle,
they formed constellations over against the
moon;*

*The cross-shaped constellations formed an
orb,
a circle made of the heavens.*²¹⁶

In the celestial luminous structure, Narekatsi seems to have wanted to also see the greatest saint of the Armenian Church, Saint

Gregory the Illuminator, who inherited and spread the spiritual light of Christ and the apostles, earning the title of *Illuminator*. In a poem dedicated to him, it is said:

*To the children of men abiding in
darkness,
from a dark region you shone, a shining
light, intelligible and sunlike....*²¹⁷

*Appearing in superior purity,
you shone on the children of Sion, lord
Saint Gregory,
rising in the fullness of the sun—more
than that of the stars....*²¹⁸

Just as the Sun-Christ shines among the stars-apostles, so too did Gregory the Illuminator shine among the children of Sion—those Armenians who had converted, "rising in the fullness of the sun—more than that of the stars."²¹⁹

It is notable that earlier, Movses Khorenatsi referred to Gregory the Illuminator as the sun that illuminated Armenia. Narekatsi portrayed Gregory the Illuminator as both the father and the mother of the children of the Armenian Church—father as the nurturer and mother as the purifier of the pure children. The great Armenian patriarch himself abundantly drank the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments, symbolized by milk, and made his faithful fellow countrymen drink it:

*From the dense darkness of godlessness,
a nursling infant, you were brought to the
edifice of light
where you suckled the twin breasts
extending from Sion:
the New and the Old Testaments for a
spiritual drink...* ²²⁰

213 Abraham Terian, *The Festal Works of St. Gregory of Narek*, p. 30.

214 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

215 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

216 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

217 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

218 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

219 *Ibid.*

220 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Gregory the Illuminator is also a firm wall of hope for his sequestered people, his little flock, the children of the Church he founded, who are guided through the stream of the river that leads to Armenia. Narekatsi considered Gregory the Illuminator, like Christ, to be a healer and a medicine: "*a cure for the tortments of demons and a healer of our souls.*"²²¹

He also symbolized the Son of God's rose, saffron, and lily as symbols: a rose grown from a thorny bush,

*saffron and graceful lily of the valleys....*²²²

However, this divine flower grew in a thorny bush. The poet refers to Gregory's father, Anak the Parthian, who killed the Armenian King Khosrov Arsacid. Thus, from this root, the plant has been planted in the flows of rivers, bearing fruit.

Narekatsi, likening Gregory the Illuminator to Christ, also considered him to be the groom of the Church—specifically, the Armenian Church: "you were appointed patriarch and bridegroom of Christ's church."²²³

To conclude, Gregory Narekatsi created a coherent and comprehensive symbolic system, which also explains the unparalleled artistic level of his poetic heritage.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 115.

²²² Ibid., p. 111.

²²³ Ibid., p. 116.