

ԳՐԱԽՕՍԱԿԱՆ**ARMENIAN CHURCH HYMNS**

**St. Nersess Shnorhali the Graceful (1103-1173),
Armenian Church Hymnbook, 1936, Jerusalem**

Catholicos Nesess IV the Graceful

Looking through the Armenian Church Hymnbook Jerusalem edition of 1936, we mostly encounter the most talented the 12th century Catholicos of Armenia St. Nersess IV Klayetsi, known as Shnorhali (the Graceful), for his spiritual, theological, devotional hymns and prayers of all times. His Encyclicals, on the other hand, comprise a large collection of directives on theological, ecumenical, and disciplinary addresses published as “*Endhanrakan Thoughtk*” (Universal Letters).

The Armenian Church *Hymnbook* is enriched immensely by St. Nersess including over 20 lengthy spiritual hymns written with their respective original music, authored and “signed” by him. In most of his hymns his name’s initials appear, and on others the 36 letters of the Armenian alphabet is chosen to begin each stanza. St. Nersess has also eloquently enriched the Armenian Church *Breviary*, the Book of Daily Services, with devotional personal prayers for each hour of the day.

Overall St. Nersess has displayed the Gospel accounts in a unique panoramic style and poetry “on the stage” as it were. The **Creation of the World** and the **Last Week of Jesus’ tragic days** in their minute details, his **Resurrection** and their implications are expressed by way of poetry and music as classified below in five units according to their contents.

1. The Creation of the World and the Resurrection of Christ spread over the seven days of the week.
2. The Last Days of Jesus’ Life on earth, his entry into Jerusalem, the washing of the disciples’ feet, the Last Supper, the betrayal, and the crucifixion.
3. The Sunrise Service and the Services of Peace and Rest.
4. The Battle of Vartanants in 451 AD, Armenia being the first nation to defend Christianity among all nations.
5. Hymns for those fallen asleep, and prayers for the rest of their souls.

UNIT ONE**The Creation of Seven Days of the Week**

For **Sunday** St. Nersess wrote a hymn beginning with his names’ six initials for each stanza. It starts with “*Norasdeghdzyal*”, meaning “*From the beginning the Word created anew the heavens and the earth.*” The first two stanzas are for the creation of the world, and the rest for the Resurrection of Christ. For the six weekdays the hymn “*Ararchagan panin hraman*” (*By the Creative Word’s Ordination*) is distributed daily by St. Nersess as follows.

For **Monday**, six verses after the first six letters of the Armenian alphabet, and subse-

quently the following sets of six verses each according to the entire 36 letters. The first six verses are dedicated to the second day of the Creation when God separated the waters from the land and created the Seraphim and the Cherubim, the Archangels and the heavenly Hosts, through which our supplications and prayers are addressed to God.

Tuesday's six stanzas are dedicated to the third day of the Creation and to John the Baptist. They sing praises for the plantation and for Noah who saved men and animals from the flood. They also praise *“the greatest among women”*, Mary the Mother-of-God. Further, *“Christ the ineffable Light and the Holy Spirit”* are invoked together as unified deity, to whom men address their prayers and blessings. St. John the Baptist is invoked once again, who *“even from his mother's womb worshipped God and became the Forerunner (Garabed) and cleansed us from our sins.”*

Wednesday's six stanzas addressed to the fourth day of the Creation are dedicated to the Annunciation of St. Mary, at which time *“the hidden mystery was revealed”* by the Birth of Jesus. St. Nersess calls St. Mary *“the bride offered from the earth to heaven,”* whose intercession is beseeched before her Son Jesus Christ. She is given a special place and called *“the most holy”* who through our supplications shall *“extinguish the fire in the furnace and shall erase our sins by her tears.”* This part of the hymn is concluded with the Gospel episode whereby *“Christ shall save us from the sea of our sins with Peter who was pulled out of the water”* and saved from the waves of the Lake of Galilee.

Thursday's hymn is dedicated to the fifth day of the Creation and is addressed to the Apostles of Christ. The same day, as said in the Book of Genesis, God created life on earth, the animals in the waters and in the air, and later saved the Old Israel from the calamities of the sea and the clouds, and was *“baptized”*. Likewise the Apostles were *“called”* from the Sea of Galilee where they were catching fish. Those fishermen were also *“baptized”* and soon founded churches on behalf of the Son and the Creative Word of God, turning those churches into *“New Zion.”*

The six succeeding stanzas for **Friday** are dedicated to the sixth day of the Creation and to the crucifixion of Christ. On that sixth day God created man, Adam, in His image as the completion of His good deeds, giving him his wife Eve his helper, so that they may enjoy life in paradise. Eve was misled by the treacherous serpent and in turn she deceived Adam, and both were expelled from paradise and the earth was cursed. Nevertheless, says St. Nersess the Graceful, the Father of glories expunged the sins of men by sending His Son, the Lamb of God, who went to the cross for the sake of mankind, saying, *“He elevated us into heaven by the cross, and on the cross he killed the sin and expunged the verdict of death.”*

Saturday's six stanzas are dedicated to the seventh day of the Creation when God rested, calling it *“the day of rest”*. Following the ordinance of the Creator, says St. Nersess, the grace of the Sabbath made us *“to rest with God”*. Remembering those dead in Christ, he further beseeches that Christ may judge them with mercy, and us the living with justice. There is in the hymn the unending completion between the dead in Christ and those living in Christ.

UNIT TWO

The Last Days of Jesus' Life

“Aysor Anjarr Lousouyn”

Saint Nersess the Graceful has written this remarkable 36-verse hymn *“Aysor Anjarr lousouyn dzagoumn”* (Today is the rising of the ineffable light) dedicated to the last week of Our

Lord's life on earth. It begins with the first and ends with the last letters of the alphabet, divided into six parts, six stanzas each. The hymn depicts the sad moments of Jesus' last days, step by step, after entering Jerusalem for the last time, cleansing the Temple from the merchants, washing his disciples' feet, eating the Last Supper, and heading to his cross after being betrayed. The Gospel narratives are faithfully introduced and put on a sacred stage with heartfelt melancholic music touching the faithful. They are sung most affectionately during the midnight service on Holy Thursday.

During the mid-night service on Good Friday, the Armenian Church has placed those six groups of the hymns in between the corresponding lengthy readings of the Gospels alternately where related events are recorded. It has been 900 years since St. Nersess has offered his talented hymns, including this one, to strengthen faith among the faithful which in turn have made them vehicles of worship in their daily lives. Singing the "*Aysor anjarr*" hymn we clearly get in touch with the Lord's sufferings and crucifixion. It is important to bear in mind that the hymns are only sung in the classical Armenian. To sing them in the vernacular or in any other language means not to sing them in the first place. The language and the music are intertwined and harmonized reciprocally, and to sing them otherwise is simply abusing the hymns.

“Norokogh Tiezerats” (Who renewed the Universe)

This hymn by St. Nersess comprises 15 stanzas with the author's initials "*Nersessi eh bans ays*" (*Nersess has written these words*). It is written exclusively for Good Friday, where Jesus' "*voluntary crucifixion*" is emphasized. His betrayal and arrest, the sufferings and His death on the cross are included in a different tone, words, and feelings, all together a complete unit geared toward the salvation of mankind in terms of "renewal".

UNIT THREE

Saints Vartanank “Norahrash Psakavor”

“Nersessi Erg” (Song by Nersess)

Saints Vartanank, headed by General Vartan Mamikonian defended Armenian Christianity as a state religion in 451 AD, the first among all nations to do so. St. Nersess Shnorhali wrote his outstanding religious-national hymn "*Norahrash Psakavor*" (*Miraculously Crowned*), addressing to General Vatan Mamikonian and to his commanders individually. It is composed of 10 stanzas according to his name's initials, dedicated to the 1036 warriors who fell during the Battle of Avarair against Persia which enforced Zoroastrianism, the fire worship, against Christianity which had its roots in Armenia since 301 AD. In each stanza the author recalls and praises the commanders of the troops by name invoking their virtuous dedication to Armenia and Christianity with most sensitive words, expressions, and poetry as follows. He also gave the music to this most popular hymn.

Norahrash is the first stanza dedicated to *Vartan the brave martyr*, the hero of the battle.

Yergnavor, the second, to *Knoren the councillor*.

Renakan, the third, to *Artak the brave*.

Srbabayl, the fourth, to *Hmayak dedicated to God the Father*.

Eyakan, the fifth, to *Tajat the incredible*.

Estatsyal, the sixth, to *Vahan the elegant*.

Ee hod anoush, the seventh, to *Arsen the desirable*.

Yerkokumbk harazadok, the eighth, to *Karekin the frontrunner*.

Ramkakan, the ninth, to *1036 martyrs*.

Gohutyamp, the tenth, to *the Armenian Church*.

As shown above the hymn begins with General Vartan Mamikonian and ends with the Mother Church of Armenia. St. Nersess Shnorhali ties together the Nation and the Church closely for which Vartanank fought the battle and never submitted to the fire worship. Among the names of the commanders *Nerseh Kamsarakan* is missing. His name is included by our two contemporary historians Yeghishe and Lazar Parbetsi as one of the commanders-in-chief on the battlefield.

Hymn of Sts. Ghevondyank

“Vor harrachagouyn” (Who from the beginning)

This hymn with six stanzas is dedicated to the Ghvondyan Priests, seven of them, headed by **Catholicos Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi** and **Ghvond the Priest**, who took part in the battle of Av-arair. Surviving the war, three years later in 454, all seven were summoned to Ctesiphon, capital of Persia, and martyred. The other five were Priests Moushegh, Arshen, Samuel, and Deacons Kachach and Abraham. In the second stanza the martyred Catholicos Hovsep and Priest Ghevond are praised as those “*who enlightened the brave and valiant soldiers.*”

“Anjarreli Bant Asdevadz” (Thou the Ineffable Word of God)

This hymn with ten alphabetical stanzas, intertwined in all 36 letters, St. Nersess dedicated to the group of seven martyred clergy mentioned above. St. Ghevond is singled out as “*the enlightener of all St. Ghevond vardapet*” who persuaded in his wisdom the volunteers who “*were martyred voluntarily.*” St. Nersess’ favorite metaphor is “*the fire of love*” that he often uses elsewhere. It is revealed here once again as “*the fire enflamed in the saints,*” through which the martyred priests encouraged each other to voluntarily offer their lives. In the same hymn, Catholicos Hovsep Hoghotsmetsi is distinguished as “*the first who met his death ahead of the chosen disciples as the good martyred shepherd.*”

UNIT FOUR

The Sunrise, Peace and Rest Services

St. Nersess the Graceful wrote and sang the **Sunrise Service** entirely dedicating it to the LIGHT. It is a journey “to find the way”, and while walking, the Holy Trinity is called and the Three Persons are invoked, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. On the way intercession of Saints, Martyrs, Volunteers, and Ascetics is asked through prayers and songs addressed to the celestial elements from the east to the west, from the north to the south originally geared to the sun and ultimately to the Son of God. The Sunrise Service shows the *WAY* to reach the *TRUTH* through the *LIGHT*.

As the Pontiff of the Armenian Church, St. Nersess was concerned about members of his flock who deviated from the orthodox faith and worshipped the sun, calling themselves “*sons of the sun*” (*arevortik*). In my opinion, he chose to address them in a way that appealed them, thus composing the Sunrise Service using their own words, east and west, north and south, sun and sunlight, in such a way that it enticed those misled to return gradually to the true Light of the True Son of God. I have come to this conclusion based on the concerned remarks St. Nersess has expressed referring to those *Arevortik* repeatedly in his collection of the Encyclicals in the volume mentioned earlier in this article. The Armenian Church sings the Sunrise Service (*Are-*

vakal) during Lent in the early morning to welcome the Light, Jesus Christ.

The Structure of the Service

The Service has four integral parts, the key word being constantly the “*imanali looys*” (the rational light), the inner spiritual light above and beyond the physical light. Comparatively with the sunshine that leads us to safety in the dark, the rational light Christ is needed for our spiritual journey as “*the Light of the World.*” The central hymn in this Service begins with the light, a word repeated 32 times, 17 times only in the opening song “*Light, creator of light, the first light.*” The word “dark” never appears in the entire service. At first the sun is introduced as the creation of God, and next the physical light is acknowledged that shines equally on the righteous and the sinner, whereby our good or evil deeds are revealed.

The four parts of this Service listed below are the integral sections enriched with songs, biddings, and prayers. Biblical readings are all from the Book of Psalms exclusively. No other citations are quoted, a peculiar choice assuring the *personal* nature of the service.

a) The first part has a universal nature, inviting “*all nations from the East to the West, from the North to the South*” to bless the Creator of the world.

b) The second part is intercessional recalling the hermits, the martyrs, and the witnesses to intercede before God through the Son of God and the Holy Spirit.

c) In the third part the Light reappears as the true expression of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. The attributes of the Light is specified as *justice, wisdom, mercy, and peace.*

d) The last section of the Sunrise Service represents its conclusion with the proclamation of the *Way*, Christ himself, identified also as the *Truth and the Life.*

Peace Service

“Nersessi Erg” (Song by Nersess)

This hymn contains ten stanzas after the numbers of his initials as spelled above. It is a popular hymn known as “*Nayats sirov*” (*Watch us with love*), the core of which is again the life of Jesus as the “*Light of the world*” as seen in the Gospels. The Light is dominant “as the rational radiant” and the “fire of love” that will cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, and instead will shine the light of knowledge in them. The next hymn, “*Ee ken haytsemk*” (*We beseech Thee*) addressed to the Holy Trinity, to the **Father of comfort**, and the **Son** who alleviates us to carry voluntarily the sweet burden as our cross, and finally St. Nersess wishes that the man-loving **Holy Spirit** renews us, asking at the same time mercy on the departed souls.

Rest Service

“Havadov khosdovanim” (In faith I confess)

This prayer is of 24 stanzas for each hour of the day by St. Nersess for exclusively personal use, written in the first person singular. First he recalls the Holy Trinity to bestow upon us their respective divine gifts. The next six are specified for the remission of our sins through self-examination asking the fear of the provident Lord. The believer’s eyes, mouth, ears, heart, hands and feet are asked to perform according to God’s commandments. “*Have mercy on Thy creatures and upon me a manifold sinner*” is the supplication repeated with trust in Christ at the end of each of the 24 verses.

The last three verses are addressed to the Just Judge, to the all-merciful Lord, and to the Glorified Lord. As a conclusion in all of them the intercession of the saints is asked, headed by St. Mary the Mother of God, followed by St. John the Baptist, St. Gregory the Illuminator, the Apostles, the Prophets, and the Patriarchs.

UNIT FIVE

Hymns for the Departed

“Asdvadz Anegh” (Uncreated God)

This hymn is identified as “*Erg Nnchetselots*” (*Hymn for the Asleep*) with three stanzas dedicated to those who are resting in Christ. The first verse begins with “*Uncreated God*”, and ends with the invitation of “*Priests and people*” to sing together for the deceased. The Holy Trinity dominates in this song, God the Father as “*merciful and patient*”, the Son as “*Lord and Savior*,” and the Holy Spirit as “*spring of goodness*.” All three are called repeatedly beseeching “*mercy for the souls who are resting in Christ*.”

The hymn is composed of four groups from the 36 stanzas as a chain, each four being sung according to the two church music tunes, 8 traditionally established tunes independently governing a given hymn. St. Nersess calls the departed as “*servants resigned from the world, whose loved ones pray that Christ accompany them and make them rest in the Father’s dwellings*.” Referring to Lazarus of Bethany’s resurrection from the grave it is said, “*You called Lazarus to come out, giving hope both to the departed and the living alike*.” As a conclusion the last stanza, “*In the upper Jerusalem where the just are gathered*” is very popular and the church sings it during the requiem services adorned with its equally sensitive music.

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