

Commentary on Solomon's
Song of Songs

elucidated by the inspired
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Prologue

Your pious majesty's command, O royal lord, was more forceful and higher than our capacity, for such a request—to comment upon the Song of Songs—is a matter for those who are Solomon-like in spirit. If Gregory of Nyssa, who was a perfect doctor of the church and indwelt by the Spirit, was deterred from completing a commentary on this book, how much more shall I, who am ignorant in every way and devoid of the grace of the Spirit, be incapable of following the thoughts uttered by the solomonic spirit! Particularly since there is no little condemnation and punishment for those who, in order not to appear ignorant, distort the words of Holy Writ through alien interpretation and with vainglorious pride display as true things which are nothing of the kind. Nonetheless, since we are commanded to be obedient to the orders of kings, I make so bold as to say what my weak mind is capable of attaining to, hoping in the Holy Spirit, and carrying out the command of him who said, 'Remain subject to kings.'¹⁰⁵

Now, first and foremost I rejoiced that you have evinced such an intention to examine Scripture, and to attend to learning; this betokens a fear of the Lord and an alienation from vile concerns,

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is an echo of the following, though it is not an exact quotation of any of them: Titus 3:1; Col 3:22; Eph 6:5; Heb 13:11. It is especially true to the spirit of Rom 13:1-8. The same quotation is repeated in the Colophon.

idle speculations and sin-loving ways, and an approach to that bliss of which the Prophet says, 'Blessed is the man who has not walked in the way of the wicked', and so on.

A little farther on he remarks, 'But he meditates on the law of the Lord day and night'. And then, adding the reward of meditating on the law of the Lord, he says 'He shall be like a tree which is planted by the rivers of water' (Ps 1:1-3). For as a tree which is planted by the rivers of water is never withered, so also is the one who examines the injunctions of God and is attentive to them day and night. He likewise will remain ever green in this life, and whatever he does God will prosper, as he prospered David himself, who was a king. Great king that he was, he spurned the cares of war and all bodily necessities, and thought only on the things of God. Because of this, he remained invincible to his enemies.

See the same in Solomon; how universal a king he was! And yet his continual concern was for that which you are reading, along with so many other writings that the world would not have sufficed to bear them all, had all his writings survived. But since the world was not worthy, and since it was not good for people to acquire such boundless knowledge, God removed Solomon's writings from the earth, because he had brought to light everything which God had done upon the earth. And had he not fallen, he would have attained yet greater grace. Thus, it is right to emulate such kings, and insatiably to study the law of the Lord.

But for now, let that be, that we may involve ourselves in the beginning of our commentary.

First, it is proper to say how the title *Song of Songs* is interpreted, and thereby to learn about the limitless dignity of it. The *Song of Songs* is the Blessing of blessings. In the same way we are used to call the holy apse where the holy altar stands the *Holy of holies*, as the Apostle himself says.¹⁰⁶ That is, if the church is holy the altar

¹⁰⁶ Perhaps a reference to Heb. 9:3 or 9:25.

is doubly holy and more so. This Song of songs, in a similar way, is above and beyond all songs and blessings; just as the Gospel is called holy and honorable above all writings in the New Testament, so this is above all writings in the Old. Concerning it, one must know that it was sung aloud in the temple, with greater suitability and prophetic inspiration than the Psalms of David, because the mystery concealed in its awesome words is ineffable.

And no corporeal being can comprehend it, except those who are in spirit like Paul, who was caught up into the third heaven and heard unutterable words, which it is beyond the power of a human being to utter (2 Cor 12:2-4). For our ears cannot bear to hear the mysteries of God, just as our eyes cannot bear the sight of God.

Thus Solomon, desiring to relate the ineffable, did so by means of a corporeal parable: by means of groom and bride, nephew and princess, daughter and dove, breasts and incense, and oil poured out, apples, mountain goats, Solomon, king, the city of Jerusalem, a garden and such like things which the eye aspires to see and the ear enjoys and the mind desires. In just such a way do the parents of children conceal special things in a good-looking package so that [the children], seeing the exterior to be desirable, will consider what is inside to be the greater treasure, and will thereby be encouraged to preserve carefully what is within. Likewise a sweet and expensive unguent like nard, which Solomon specifically mentions, is contained in a vessel; moreover, its fragrance cannot last apart from that.

As the Lord Himself says in the Holy Gospel, 'Do not cast your pearls before swine' (Mt 7:6); that is, do not present ineffable things to weak ears. The same Spirit instructed Solomon neither to disseminate openly the things which he had seen by the Spirit's light, nor to conceal completely the mysteries of the Church and salvation and the incarnation of Christ and all that he suffered for love of humankind, and his death and resurrection, and his second coming, and the unimaginable rewards which are stored up

for the saints, and the intensity of the saints' love for Christ, which they bore within themselves to the extent of suffering and death, loving Christ as He loved us (1 Jn 4:19); who in order to express His boundless love towards us was obliged to put on flesh, and even to spill his holy blood for us. He who as God would have been able by *fiat* to save us from Satan's clutches, did it through righteousness, and restrained him by force. He accomplished this quietly, and not through domination. Thus our servitude was to be redeemed both legally and mercifully; the death, that is, by which it was lawfully decreed for us to return to dust because of our disregard for the commandment not to eat of the fruit [of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil]. That just judgment he did not remove without the Law, although he had the authority to do so. Rather, he put on the flesh of Adam, and took upon himself his death, and redeemed us through righteousness. Moreover, he mingled mercy with righteousness and righteousness with mercy, and it was through all this that he displayed his love towards us, which is beyond telling.

All of this the Song of Songs relates; by parables, it shows us the brilliant adornment of the Church through the cross and the altar, the body and blood of the Lord, the holy font and the sacred chrism, the Old and New Testaments, apostles and prophets and *vardapets*,¹⁰⁷ priests and hermits, virgins and martyrs, Christian kings and all pure peoples who were to be planted in the Church, together with other ineffable and so inexpressible gifts. Yet, even he did not recognize the whole of it, nor was he able to acquaint us with it all; he could not even clearly express what he himself knew, but rather did so by analogy.

Should one then ask, 'How could he allegorize this using a bride and groom? How is it possible to signify the mystery of God by means of physical desire, and to illustrate the limitless love

¹⁰⁷ On the significance of the *vardapet* in the Armenian church, see above, n. 19.

of God by analogy with passionate love?' We ought first to bewail our licentious ways, we who are so far estranged from God's mysteries that the Holy Spirit, through Solomon, was constrained to relay these insupportable things to us by means of an animal desire. It is because of such realities that the blessed universal teacher John asserts that we ought to adopt such a saintly way of life that Scripture would become unnecessary¹⁰⁸—as was the case for Noah and Abraham and his sons and grandsons, and as it was for Job and Moses and the apostles, who instead of Scripture had Him dwelling in their hearts, and He taught them and wrote on the tables of their hearts rather than in books (2 Cor 3:3).

We would thus have obtained a heart so illumined and angelic that we would have had no need of such parables of bride and groom to formulate the mysteries of Christ and the Church and whatever intelligible good things are in heaven. However, since we have lost that kind of dignity and have blinded those eyes, let us turn, sighing, to the second-best, and view the spiritual things through the physical, as Solomon, having received the grace of the Holy Spirit, relates them.

In addition, holy matrimony, and the love of a groom for his bride and of a bride for her groom, as it is free from defilement, is not foreign to the grace of the Spirit through whom its mystery is consummated in that of Christ and the Church. The Apostle, confirming the words of Solomon, says, 'This mystery is great. But I speak of Christ and the Church' (Eph 5:32). Thus, whoever defiles holy matrimony by defiled relations and evil acts, defiles the mystery of the Church and dishonors Christ, for [Christ and the Church] are the archetype of [marriage].

Let us expound yet more on the mystery set before us and show that God has love towards humanity as great as a groom's

¹⁰⁸ The source of this reference is unknown to me. It is my hope that readers more deeply versed in patristic literature than I will be able to identify some of the quotations which have eluded me.

for his bride. Isaiah says, 'As the bridegroom rejoices in the bride, so does the Lord rejoice in you' (Is 62:5). David himself also says this in his lament over Jonathan, 'Love of you pains me more than the love of women' (2 Sam 1:26).

Now, there is nothing more honorable or greater on earth than the love of a man and a woman. If to some individual it seems not to be especially great or important, it seems so because he has either not come to marriage in a sacred way or has not maintained his virginity in a holy manner, but by his prodigal defilements he has thrust away from himself the grace of the Spirit. Whereas all who approach marriage in a pure and spotless manner, and by the Holy Spirit's ineffable love are united to one another, are blessed with the blessing whereby Adam and Eve were blessedly united. Those who are united with this kind of love and blessing die for one another, literally to the degree that they will spill their blood for one another.

It is the case that for love of family many have fallen away from Christ and apostacized because of the persecutions of our time. But even Adam gave up Paradise and the light of glory for love of his wife and fell outside, not because he wanted to become God, but because it seemed to him too onerous to be separated from her love. He well knew that he would be punished by God—because he was not an ignorant person but rather was filled with the prophetic spirit—and he had not yet fallen from the grace of the Spirit, because he had not yet transgressed the commandment.

Even after eating the fruit, he did not completely lose the Spirit, but while he was in Paradise he understood through the Holy Spirit the ways of all living creatures; and when God brought them to Adam, he gave them names one by one according to their individual habits. While he slept, Eve was created and when He brought her to him, he prophetically declared, 'This now is bone of my bone' (Gn 2:23), and he foretold as well the procreative increase which would derive from woman, and the leaving of

father and mother to go after one's wife, and their becoming one flesh (Gn 2:24).

Moreover, after eating the fruit, he prophetically recognized our salvation, which was to come through woman, that is, through the Holy Mother of God; for which reason he named his wife 'Life' (Gn 3:20). If this had not been so, how could he have called 'Life' her, who became the cause of death to all Adam's generations? The Holy Illuminator, too, says, 'Saying this, he understood all the deeds which were to be on earth until the accomplishment, even salvation through Christ.'¹⁰⁹

Now if, when he had fallen from glory, he retained the spirit of prophecy, how much more must he have had it while he was yet in glory! Thus it is obvious that, as the Apostle says, 'Adam was not deceived' by the snake's lying promise through Satan, 'but the woman was deceived and transgressed' (1 Tim 2:14); Adam ate of the fruit in order not to be separated from his wife, and for love of her, not in order to become god—as the woman had eaten.

It is the same even now; for love of their wives men honor their wives' injunctions, knowing perfectly well that what they will is wrong and not appropriate, yet for love of them they are constrained to do it. Hence Solomon, being aware that in humans this love is greater than any other love, used it as a parable of the love of Christ and the Church for one another. Not that the love of God is simply equivalent to this one; God's love is greater than

¹⁰⁹ In *Teaching of St. Gregory* §264 and §276 there are statements similar to this. The idea that Adam was a prophet can be found in numerous sources and across many centuries. The thirteenth-century teacher Vanakan Vardapet, for example, in his *Questions and Answers* notes that Adam's identification of Eve was evidence that God had given him prophetic powers; the same idea is to be found in the *Cave of Treasures*, tr. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927) 53, and in Saint Ephrem the Syrian's *Commentary on Genesis*, Syriac version (the Armenian version does not include it); K. McVey, ed., *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, tr. Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar. The Fathers of the Church, 91 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1995) 150.

that of marriage, to the same extent that the inequality between God and humanity is great.

Nonetheless, anyone who reads this book needs to purify his mind and understanding of all thoughts of bodily marriage, and then to devote himself to the hearing of it. For this is Mount Horeb, where God dwelt, and just as when any beast approached that mountain it was stoned,¹¹⁰ the same fate will befall anyone who approaches the revealed words of this book in an animal manner. For which reason we ought to place ourselves beyond all fleshly thoughts, closing the eyes of the body and opening those of the spirit, so that we may be able like Moses to ascend this conceptual mount where God lives, and to express, according to our ability, the secret, deep things of God which are in it. May the Holy Spirit lead us, giving to us a tongue to speak, and to you who listen, a mind to hear.

¹¹⁰ An allusion to Ex 19:10-15.

Ecclesiastes

That is, the ingathering of the *Ecclesia*, which was divided into futile cults; it is the people that is called the *Ecclesia*, the Church.

¹¹¹*I understood that the flesh strengthens youth.*

That is, the *youth* of Adam, aged by sin, attained to Solomon's knowledge through the Holy Spirit; the *flesh* is our own, which Christ was to put on. By means of that flesh was our decrepit nature strengthened to return to youth, putting on the glorious light of which it had been stripped.

He shall elevate it into our barns,

Whether you understand this as Paradise or heaven—both are possible interpretations—into it the Lord shall *elevate* us who

¹¹¹ Here the rubric *The maidens and the queens say* is omitted. (On the rubrics, see n. 99, above.) Vardan the Great authored a sermon on 'the Word of Solomon, "I knew that flesh [strengthens] youth"; P.P' Ant'apyan, *Vardan Arewelts'i, Kyank'n u Gorjunëut'yunë* [Vardan Arewelts'i, Life and Work] (Erevan, 1989), vol. 2:324. The piece occurs in only one ms (M 5862) and comprises a mere three pages; nonetheless, its existence attests to the acceptance of the additional verses to the Song of Songs.

have been brought low through sin. And if anyone should ask who accomplished this salvation, he will hear—

*our king, Christ, who sits on the throne like a date palm,
golden and full of myrrh.*

The flesh reigning united with the Word of God *on the throne* of God, like a *golden date palm* pure of sin as gold is pure, foretells the divine united with the flesh, that is with the *date palm*. How is it that our flesh was called a *date palm*? It is because His flesh was unspotted by sin. For if David says 'The righteous flourish like a date palm' (Ps 92:12) because of their propriety, how much more would this metaphor apply to the divinized flesh! Because He suffered mortality, He is also *full of myrrh*, which was brought to Him by the very magi themselves as a gift, with the two other gifts, to foretell this; I need not remind you that He was wrapped in *myrrh* at His burial.

The king shall return thence to his youth,

This utterance repeats the previous ones, which said that *the flesh strengthens youth*. Man is here referred to as *king*, because he was made in the image of God. *The king shall return thence to his youth*; that is, to the original glory which he possessed in Paradise.

my beloved to his chamber.

Whereas in the preamble he called the Kingdom a *barn*, where the just are to be 'stored up', here he refers to it as a *chamber*. He is the *beloved* because He loved man more than the angels, by virtue of which love He put on our nature.

Sing his love.

That is, bless the love of Him who loved so much, who granted such gifts to us again by means of His death.

Even I am in the Psalter.

This sentence has two interpretations: one, that 'I am the One described in the Psalms. What I achieved in the direction of salvation, and what I suffered, is written in the Psalms'. I do not want to adduce witnesses in support of this interpretation one by one, since I am trying to be concise.

The second interpretation is that, 'If someone desires to sing and bless my love by means of the Psalms, it is I who instruct him, how he should bless Me'. The Apostle attests to this, saying, 'When one stands in prayer, we do not know how it ought to be, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with soundless groaning' (Rom 8:26). In other words, when you groan in prayer the Holy Spirit wordlessly and soundlessly teaches you the words of blessing.

I shall sing with my companions;

That is, with the angels. How can the angels be called our *companions*? For one thing, we came into existence through the Creator, as did they; and for a second, we were not far from angelic glory, but 'only a little lower than the angels', as David says (Ps 8:6).

we shall sing and rejoice in the beloved King,

That is, when we receive again our lost glory we shall rejoice in our King, Christ, who loved us, and we shall sing to Him with blessing.

although we may be hidden from sight,

Hereby he expresses that although God is invisible to us because we have physical eyes, we shall bless Him unseeingly.

our eyes by fifties.

Among the numbers, ten is perfect. And if one counts higher, he returns to one, saying 'ten-plus-one' and so on. The Theologian affirms this too.¹¹² Now, what applies to the units, also applies to the tens—ten tens are a hundred, and five tens are fifty. One hundred is a perfect number, like ten; while fifty is half that number, like five is half of ten. Thus, humans have half eyes—that is, *by fifties*—not perfect ones. So how could one see what is concealed *from our sight*; that is, from our *fifties*? It is invisible even to the hundreds!—that is, it is also invisible to the angels. Albeit not to the same degree as it is for us, yet their vision also is imperfect.

The Lord created you and established you.

He made the first man, and He also re-established in that same glory the one who had fallen.

*He prepared you from the womb;
your mother was the most beautiful among women.*

¹¹² Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 45.xiv mentions the perfection of the number ten; its perfection was a standard topos of Christian arithmology, having been sanctioned by Philo, the foundation of so much exegetical thinking. See also R. Ervine, 'Vardan Vardapet's Sermon on the Ten Commandments', *St. Nersess Theological Review* 8 (2003) 12–83, esp. 64–66.

The womb is the font, and it is the Church which is called *Mother Sion*, for 'Sion is called mother, and a man was born in her' (Ps 86:5).

*A body shall be born for him without fault and without blemish,
by another Providence.*

That is, by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle, too, says, 'Born again, not of corruptible seed, but of the incorruptible, living and eternal Word of God' (1 Pt 1:23).

For he had possessed such,

That is, previously they had had a body without blemish, spotless, luminous, before he ate of the fruit.

and it was the blessings of blessings

By saying *blessing of blessings*, he herewith adduces as evidence the words of his father David, 'The Lord said to me, thou art my son, and this day have I begotten thee' (Ps 2:7).

1.1 *The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's*

Solomon means *peace*. Thus, he symbolizes Christ, for 'He is our peace', as the Apostle says (Eph 2:14).

Now since we have been born a new generation, we beseech our parent to kiss us with maternal love, to bring us near to the divine mouth, so that when She kisses us, we may drink from Her mouth that which Her all-holy mouth said: 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink' (Jn 7:37) [Nyssa 779a].

Because of that, it says:

— CHAPTER ONE —

1.2 *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,*¹¹³

Moreover, being the prodigal son, we are kissed by our heavenly Father, as the Gospel parable relates. So under the guise of the kiss, we beseech Him to increase ‘the love wherewith He loved us’ (Eph 2:4).

for your breasts are better than wine,

The commandments which are ‘sucked’ by the spirit from the *breasts* of Scripture, *are better than wine*; as the Prophet says, ‘The words of your mouth are better to me than thousands of gold and silver’ (Ps118:72). For the milk which flows from the breast is the cause of life, whereas wine merely gives strength.¹¹⁴

1.3 *and the odor of your unguents is better than all fragrant incense.*

Thus are the virtue and good works which emanate from the divine *unguent* [Nyssa 781B-C]; in other words, that which the Holy Spirit teaches to those who draw near and savor it.

Your name is like ointment poured forth;

¹¹³ The awkwardness of the shift in English between Her/Him is less noticeable in Armenian, in which third person singular pronouns are not gender specific.

¹¹⁴ In the poetical setting of his *Ban* 75.14 Narek states that the milk of Mother Church’s breasts is Christ’s blood. *Odes of Solomon* 8:14; 14:2; 19:1-4, uses the imagery of the breasts: 19:4 says ‘The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.’ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland: Doubleday, 1985) 2:752.

And as what is poured out of the vessel is unexaminable, and only by means of the vessel is the ointment in it recognized, by the same token the nature of the godhead is unfathomable and inconceivable and invisible, *like ointment poured forth*. Yet it perfumes the souls of the righteous [Nyssa 784A] and those who, in terms of sin, are like little children (1 Cor 14:20); the ointment, like its vessel, is precious.

Now, since the godhead’s name is *like ointment poured forth*, and is unattainable by human knowledge, even by the perfect saints—and not only the saints, but also the entire panoply of the heavenly beings—nonetheless, by means of His union with our nature through the holy Virgin, we have seen the *ointment* insofar as it is possible to see it. This the Lord himself said to the blind man: when He asked, ‘Do you believe in the Son of God?’ and he responded, ‘Who is he, Lord?’ the Lord added, ‘You have both seen Him, and the one who speaks with you is He’ (Jn 9:35-37). He meant that, having seen the divinized flesh, he had seen the invisible *ointment* Himself.

therefore do the maidens love thee.

He identifies as *maidens* those who in terms of sin have become like children (1 Cor 14:20), and the angels as well.

1.4 *We shall run after you because of the fragrance of your ointments.*

Those who become worthy to sample the flavor of the Word of God, and to take in His fragrance, *run* insatiably *after the fragrance* of His *ointments*, and never desist from the pursuit [Nyssa 785A]. Even though it might happen that they suffer prison and bonds or be obliged to forsake their children, as the first saints who

detected this *fragrance* took it upon themselves to do, they do not swerve.¹¹⁵

The bride tells the maidens concerning what the groom has granted her.

The Church and the people are called *the Bride*. And the *maidens* are the angels and saints; those who, as has been mentioned, have become as little children with regard to sin. So the Bride is addressing the *maidens*, that is, the first Fathers and the prophets and the righteous, and the angels as well.

*The king led me into his chamber.*¹¹⁶

In other words, 'He translated me into the Kingdom, to His abode;¹¹⁷ thus, in the stead of Paradise, our natural abode from which I was expelled, He has given me that which is even better'.

*The bride addresses the maidens, and they say:
We shall rejoice and be glad in you,
and we shall love thy breasts more than wine.*

¹¹⁵ *Teaching of St. Gregory* §440–441 are devoted to the image of the Bride as the Church of the gentiles. There Song 1:1-3 is quoted; in that context, the *breasts* are the testaments, 'which give drink to all the ignorant with the spiritual milk of knowledge'. The *ointment* reveals 'the anointing of Christ and his name', and the kiss is the sign of their mutual love.

¹¹⁶ Verses 1-4 of this chapter appear in *Teaching of St. Gregory* §440, where they are addressed by Christ to the faithful.

¹¹⁷ At this point Thomson, 'Song', references Procopius of Gaza, *Epitome in Cantiorum* (PG 87:1552C), in which Procopius in turn quotes from Cyril of Alexandria. The ultimate basis for the identification of the chamber with the Kingdom lies in the eschatological exegesis of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Mt 25.

That is, the righteous join in the joy of the gentiles' salvation, and they *rejoice* mutually in the Saviour Jesus, and together they love the *breasts* of love, which are the commandments of God.

The maidens speak the name of the bride to the groom.

The *maidens* mean the friends of Christ the Groom. Quite often, any commentary is superfluous!

Uprightness loved thee.

David also says this: 'The Lord our God is upright' (Ps 24:8; 91:16). Now, if He who is upright has loved us, He requires the same love from you, His beloved.

*The bride says,
1.5-6 I am black and beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tent of Kedar, and like the tabernacle of Solomon. Do not look at me because I am black, because the sun has looked upon me fiercely. The sons of my mother fought with me, and they set me as the keeper of the vineyard, so my own vineyard have I not kept.*

Now, if the words of the prophetic books do not coincide with one another, do not expect absolute precision. For the blessed universal teacher John says 'Translating from the Hebrew language into Greek, one cannot convey the meaning completely.'¹¹⁸ Even more so in our circumstances; when translated

¹¹⁸ The editor of the Armenian text (Venice 1840) cites John Chrysostom's *Commentary on Genesis* as the source of this quotation. In *Homily 4* on Genesis, §9, Chrysostom makes a statement on the translation of the Septuagint and the effects of the translation on certain phrases; however, a much closer parallel is found in

from the Greek or the Syriac, the meaning is obscured in Armenian. Gregory of Nyssa says the same in this very commentary [Nyssa 796 A-B].

That notwithstanding, the gist of the utterance is this; when the maidens have said to the Bride—that is, to the gentile believers—‘With what great love has the Upright One loved you! Therefore do not stray any more and move away from Uprightness’, the Bride responds by praising Christ the Groom; she relates her earlier transgressions and the chastisements which she suffered. *I am black, and am become beautiful* now through His mercy, O *Daughters of Jerusalem*. It calls the righteous *daughters of Jerusalem*, and, as often occurs in the books of the prophets, it is usual to call the angels *daughters* as well, because they possess a modesty like that of women, inasmuch as the female sex is more modest than the male.

It says *like the tent of Kedar*. Kedar means ‘dark’; that is to say, ‘I was the tent of Satan, and through the mercy of God I am now fit to be the *tabernacle of Solomon*’. It says *the tabernacle of Solomon*, referring to the Temple; in other words, ‘Now, like the *tabernacle of Solomon*, I have become God’s house’. Hereby, it anticipates the Church of the gentiles [Nyssa 792 A].

Then again recalling her earlier ugliness, she adds, ‘*Do not look at me because I am black*’, meaning the blackness of sin, ‘*because having caught me in transgression, God the Sun looked on me fiercely*’. By this she indicates the bitterness of the punishments which He inflicted upon her, and her expulsion both from God’s presence and from Paradise. Because of whose transgression did

the *Second Homily On the Obscurity of the Old Testament*, where it is expounded upon at length. For a recent translation of the above, see St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17; Homily 4* is found on pp. 51–65; *idem.*, *Old Testament Homilies*, translated by Robert Charles Hill, 3 volumes (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003); *The Second Homily on the Obscurity of the Old Testament* is found in vol. 3:25-51.

this come about? The Bride says, ‘*The sons of my mother fought with me*’. She calls Satan ‘*my mother’s son*’, for they were both made by one Creator.

And they set me as keeper of the vineyard, so my own vineyard have I not kept. This is what ‘God set him in the paradise of delight, to dress it and keep it’ (Gn 2:15) means. It is not as if Paradise, where all was enjoyment and divine protection, needed any dressing or keeping, other than his doing right, and keeping the commandment which He had previously taught him [Nyssa 797D].

The bride says to the groom,

1.7 *Tell me, whom my soul loves, where do you shepherd, where do you rest your flock at midday, lest I become like one who goes after the flocks of your companions.*

Now, the Bride having recounted from what ugliness and blackness to what beauty she was transformed, the Groom being willing to forget the Bride’s wickedness because of His love for her, she is likewise inflamed with love for Him. She beseeches the Groom to tell her what the path is along which she may be shepherded under the hand of her Shepherd, so that, going towards the shadowless Light she may remain invulnerable to the predatory Enemy.

At midday the sun’s light is without shadow; for that reason she mentions noonday: ‘Let me not be blackened by demonic ways of life with my previous companions in sin and stray from the place of good pasture’.

As the Lord Himself says in the holy Gospel, ‘I am the good Shepherd’ (Jn 10:14); ‘Whoever enters in by me will be saved’ (Jn 10:7-9), and so on [Nyssa 801A].

The groom says to the bride,

1.8 *If you do not know yourself, O most beautiful among women, follow the footprints of the flock, and pasture your goats by the tents of the shepherds.*

The Groom answers according to the Bride's question, reminding her of the beauty which He has given her, and cautioning her to know herself; as the Prophet said, 'Look to yourself' (Dt 4:9). Now, he is saying 'Remember the previous gifts—that is, Paradise and glory—having received which you contaminated them through sin; you again found mercy, not by virtue of good works which you performed, but through me who, in your place, made recompense for your sins.' As the Prophet says, 'In my stead, the Lord recompenses' (Ps 137:8).

'But if you do not remember all this, and you do not look to yourself, and you do not humble yourself from your arrogance, and if like your forefather you are proud of your upright ways or your good works which you have done in your repentance from evil, and if you do not hereafter walk aright, you will leave my flock, who are fruitful in wool and milk. Instead of my flock you will join the herd of goats, who are unproductive, for they have neither wool nor milk; who have strayed from the good Shepherd's tent, following the tracks of strange flocks which think themselves to be the flock and which are not the flock. Thereafter you will not find the Good Shepherd again [Nyssa 804 C].

So be careful for the salvation which I have accomplished for you, fighting with the chariots and horses of the invisible pharaoh by my formidable power'. This is what it means when he says,

1.9 *I shall compare you, my Near One,¹¹⁹ to my horse among the chariots of Pharaoh.*

'Overwhelming his chariots, I made you my Near One, carrying you through the sea of sin'.

Now, I am trying to be brief; if you desire to hear more extended statements, you should go to Gregory of Nyssa.¹²⁰

The maidens say to the bride

These are the friends of the Groom, the apostles and prophets, and *vardapets*, who continually advise us to regard how much our re-creation excels the original creation by comparing it to a dove, a necklace, gold, silver and horses.

1.10 *For your cheeks are beautiful like a dove's,*

That bird loves purity. If its mate should happen to die, it never, until its death, unites with any other of its kind. So, by praising her *cheeks* as being *like a dove's*, he conveys that, 'You are the countenance and likeness of God, adorned with purity like a dove. The awe of His commandments adorns you like a circlet around your neck (Prv 1:9), pure and cleansed from sin, like gold and silver'. Metaphorically, that is; not actual silver and gold. For that spiritual beauty with which humanity is adorned, is beyond human thought.

He who has heard unutterable words (2 Cor 12:4), like Paul and his spiritual ilk, is also God's resting place, like a *horse*. Now, the maidens said this in support of the Groom's words comparing his *horse*, which fought with *Pharaoh*, to the Bride in virtue.

Those who are adorned with good works are shown to have attained to yet greater gifts; not only does He rest upon you like a *horse*, but He receives you into His bosom. As it continues:

¹¹⁹ The Armenian *merjawor im*, here translated as 'My Near One', has meanings ranging from 'intimate' to 'closely related' (by blood or otherwise), to 'similar'.

¹²⁰ It should be noted that in Nyssa the point is quite different; he stresses the overcoming of subjection to evil by means of mystical wonder.

until the king shall receive you into his bosom.

It occurs to me, however, that you have not fully comprehended the commentary on these words. So let me perforce recapitulate:

*I shall compare you to my horse among the chariots of Pharaoh,
O my Near One*

Now, one must ask him about the *horse*, 'If it be yours, why is it among the chariots of Pharaoh? And who may Pharaoh be?' Listen, and I will explain it. God's *horse* is our human nature, because it was the resting place and abode of the godhead.¹²¹ Like an obdurate *horse* it became arrogant in conceit, and through sin it turned into a steed of Satan, who is described as *Pharaoh*. With him Christ the Saviour fought by means of the cross. The prototype of that cross was the rod of Moses, which parted the sea and drowned *Pharaoh*, that is, Satan. [God's] image, which like a *horse* had been harnessed to [Satan's] *chariot*, He again gathered to Himself. This is that it means when it says, *to my horse among the chariots of Pharaoh*: the efficacious power of the godhead destroyed the chariots of *Pharaoh*.

Or again, "That metaphorical *horse*, royally adorned and harnessed to *the chariot of Pharaoh*, was also Mine, for all creation is Mine. Now, I shall compare you to that adorned *horse* of Mine, which I rode so forcefully that they said, "Let us flee from the face of Israel"" (Ex 14:25).

Likewise, He made you His steed, adorned with a circlet, and the other things he listed in order, drowning the invisible *Pharaoh* in the fiery sea. Having decked you out in so much virtue, He took you, who had been His *horse*, to Himself; instead of riding you, He took you into His bosom, and even more, carried you on His shoulder, as the Lord says in the Gospel (Lk 15:5).

¹²¹ In his *Encomium on the Apostles*, Gregory refers to them as 'steeds of the Word' (*Writings*, 435).

*The bride says to herself and to the groom,
1.12-14 My spikenard has sent forth its fragrance. My
Nephew is a bundle of myrrh; he shall rest between my
breasts. My Nephew is to me like a blooming cluster in
the vineyards of Engedi;*

That is, among the luxuriant fruits of the vineyards.

First of all, know that the one called the Groom is also called her *Nephew*, for the Word of God became incarnate of the Jews, and the Jews and the gentiles are also brothers because they are both from Adam.

My Nephew is a bundle of myrrh; he shall rest between my breasts. This is what the word means in the Gospel: 'Whoever believes in me, has affirmed that God is true' (Jn 3:33) [Nyssa 824 C]. Now whoever believes in Him and gathers His commandment and the fear of Him into his heart is like precious ointment and fragrant incense, especially because he spreads that fragrance to others. As the Apostle says, 'We are a sweet savor of Christ to God among the saved, and among the lost' (2 Cor 2:15) [Nyssa 825 B].

There is, however, an animal which dies from sweet fragrance, like the sinners who do not accept the instruction of the fragrant Scriptures which *rest between the breasts*; that is, in the hearts of the saints [Nyssa 825 B]. Those who receive [that fragrance] will be translated from life to life, and those who do not receive it, from death to death (2 Cor 2:16). As Christ's great martyr Ignatius said, 'I bear in myself Christ'. Hearing this Trajan said, 'I give order to burn that Ignatius who bears the Crucified One in himself, so that the Crucified One will be burned together with him.'¹²²

¹²² The story is from the *Martyrdom of Ignatius*, the Armenian version of which is to be found in the series *Sop'erk'* 22 (Venice, 1861) 141-185, but there is no exact verbal parallel there.

The groom says to the bride

15.15 *Behold, my Near One, behold, my beautiful one, your eyes are doves.*

'Because you have come *near* to Me, and have become estranged from sin, you have received the previous beauty which you possessed in Paradise, and you have attained not to this gift alone, but by regarding Me you have received the *eyes* of a *dove*; that is, of the Holy Spirit'¹²³ [Nyssa 836 B]. For whatever a person looks at, he becomes in thought.

Now, if I do not prolong the words of my commentary, know that it is because I prefer brevity.

The bride says to the groom

1.16-17 *Behold my Nephew, and beautiful as well; there are canopies to our seat. The beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are fir.*

Once the Groom has shown her the eyes of the Spirit, pure as those of a dove, the Bride testifies, 'What I could not see then, when I had not been transformed into the nature of a *dove*, I can now see, having become a *dove*—my *Nephew*. For although you became *my Nephew*, taking on the flesh of my ugliness, yet you are *beautiful* to me because you mingled your divinity with my nature'. As the Prophet says, 'Fairer in appearance than all the children of men' (Ps 44:3).

There are canopies to our seat; that is, she calls Christ in His incarnation our *canopy* and *house* [Nyssa 836 B]. *The beams of our*

¹²³ Connecting the dove with the Holy Spirit is a commonplace. *Teaching of St. Gregory* §418 and 420 make this connection, while §603 deals with the dove's faithfulness to its nest and §605 ties the two concepts together. §606 uses Is 60:8 to apply the dove's qualities to the saints at the Second Coming, rising to meet the Lord.

house are cedar: that wood is sweet smelling and incorruptible, and good for building. Likewise the body of our Lord, 'Whose house we ourselves are' (Heb 3:6) [Nyssa 840 A], according to Paul, is good for building this *house*, or for purifying us to dwell there.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The groom says to himself and to the bride

The Groom more clearly reveals His beauty, invisible and inexpressible. What the Bride perceives dimly with the eyes of the Spirit, He relates:

2.1 *I am a flower of the fields, a lily of the valleys.*¹²⁴

What an amazing thing! Like the bodily incarnation of the Lord, by which He brought the invisible into visibility for us, He tries by a similar metaphor to display the lovely adornment which the earth put on at receiving Christ. How the earth's appearance, crowned with flowers, delights the eye of the beholders, and the *lily* which is in *the valleys*! Just so are those who spread out their souls, like *fields*, for my habitation, and they burgeon because of Me, like *the valleys*. They flower around Me to the inutterable joy of the beholders'. And this is not all, but,

¹²⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten* (Oxford, 1881), §10, also adduces this verse to describe Christ: 'In the Song of Songs our Lord Jesus Christ Himself has been introduced to us saying, "I am the flower of the plain, the lily of the valleys". As then the smell is something unembodied, for it uses as its own body that wherein it is, . . . so shall we conceive of the Nature of the Godhead in Christ too, that it sheds forth on the world the savour of His own more than earthly Excellence, as in the object of human nature. . . .'

2.2 *Like a lily among the thorns, so is my Near One among the daughters.*

'Not only am I the Groom beautiful after the manner of these flowers, but the Bride, who is near to me, becomes as beautiful among the daughters as a lily among thorns'.

He calls *daughters* those wedded to Satan; that is, the sinful. There is no need to explain *thorns*, remembering the parable in the Gospel of the thorns and the tares (Mt 13), which the Lord did not allow to be plucked up from among the wheat until the time of harvest, which is the end of this world. The Song of Songs, as well, considered it appropriate for the righteous to be among the sinners. First, because the way of life of the righteous would appear all the brighter, as the precious stands out amidst the cheap. And secondly, because the *thorns* may perhaps turn into *lilies*, seeing the worth of the latter.

The bride says to the groom

2.3a *Like an apple amid the forest, so is my Nephew among the sons.*¹²⁵

See how step by step she augments her praise of the Groom. He who was at first called *a lily* and *a flower*, now is *an apple*. A flower delights only the eye, whereas the apple delights the eye with its appearance, the palate with its scent, and then comes into its own as a food [Nyssa 844 B].¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Because of a typographical (or perhaps scribal) error in the text, *usterats'* [sons] appears in the printed editions as *dsterats'* [daughters]. The word is correctly rendered at the end of the same section.

¹²⁶ The ninth-century writer Bishop Sahak Mrtut (c. 820–c. 890) in his long *Exposition of the Faith*, p. 89 (for full reference, see n. 85, above) makes the following comment on this verse:

Now, an *apple*, made of the four elements in combination as one, is a type of Christ. If you are able, separate the four contrary elements which have

What she spoke of there as *thorns* is here a *forest*—that is, people who are 'afforested', so to speak, with sin; as it says 'The wild boar of the forest laid it waste' (Ps 79:14).

He also calls the children of wicked fathers *the sons*.

2.3b *Under his shadow did I desire to sit down, and I sat, and his fruit was sweet in my throat.*

This does not need much interpretation. We who had made offerings to forests and leafy trees, having now made the acquaintance of the *apple* which was given to us from the Tree of Life, have taken refuge in *his shadow* with eagerness. We sit around Him with immovable faith: to *sit*, means not to 'stand up' for false doctrine.

And His fruit was sweet in my throat. Hereby you should understand the life-giving sacrament and the fruit from the Tree of Life, and also the words which were given to us by His divine mouth. Both interpretations are possible. As the Prophet says, 'Your words are sweet to the palate, sweeter than honey to my mouth' (Ps 118:103) [Nyssa 844 C].

The bride says to the maidens

2.4 *Take me to the house of wine.*

She says openly, 'I am not satisfied by the bringing of the cup, or by the divine words. For I have an insatiable desire, and indolent ways. So *take me to the house of* these very good things,

been commingled and have become a single apple: isolate the wet and the dry, the cold and the hot. If you lack the ability to do even this, how much more impossible is it to separate Christ's combination of godhead and humanity commingled and become one Nature and one Christ, into two separate parts! Thus, if four physical elements united make one apple with one nature, how much more must the commingled union of incorporeal with corporeal, firmly conjoined, make a single Person and a single Nature, inseparable in its union.

for I have no great desire towards the Groom, and towards His commandments; if I see Him and hear them through you, I shall be satisfied'.

Wine is an occasion for gladness. In this life people like to cause forgetfulness of sorrow; for that reason she calls the giving of God's gifts *wine*.

Set love upon me,

Do not demand too much consistency between expressions, as I have previously stated; just grasp the explanation of them. Here, it says *set love*, just as it says in another place, *arouse love*. [Nyssa 845 B]

God is Love. Love is recognized as God's name; the Apostle says, 'God is love, and whoever remains in love dwells in God, and God in him' (1 Jn 4:12). So the Bride, warmed with love of the Groom, beseeches the friends of the Groom not to speak for Him distantly, as did the prophets, but in an apostolic manner to introduce her into the *house* of Christ, whom she described as *wine*. For by the sight of one another's faces is love of the beloved inflamed in both. This is what *set love upon me* means.

2.5 and establish me with ointments.

Mercy is called *ointment*. So this means, 'When I see the Groom, by the opening of my spiritual eye I shall recognize yet more the boundless mercy which He has worked for us, and I shall be the more *established*', and I shall discover it through mercy, as the Theologian says.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ The source of this quotation is not known to me.

Pile up for me apples,

The beauty of good works is called *apples* [Nyssa 849 C-D]. For as by its appearance and scent an *apple* is appetizing even before one tastes it, likewise the sight of various virtues exhilarates those who see it.

for I am overcome by love.

Love dwelt among the saints with immeasurable celebration, through the coming of Christ. They who tasted the savor of that Love became insatiable; they were not satisfied with the various trials which they suffered, whether from Satan or from human beings, but they voluntarily added innumerable tribulations for themselves. They resembled the Prophet David, who, concerning the tribulations which come from others, said, 'The pangs of death surrounded me, and the sorrows of hell found me'. He increased his soul's tribulation yet more: as he adds, 'I discovered tribulation and difficulty' (Ps 114:3). Similarly, the Holy Illuminator and the great Paul and other saints like them considered the tribulations which came for Christ's sake¹²⁸ to be gifts, like *apples*; thus, Trdat said to Saint Gregory, 'Is that happiness?' and he responded, 'Yea, this is happiness'!¹²⁹

¹²⁸ An allusion to Mt 5:11.

¹²⁹ Agathangelos § 105. Saint Gregory the Illuminator there avows that the torture of being beaten over the head for Christ's sake is happiness. Armenians were in awe of the number and variety of tortures endured by the Illuminator. See A. Terian, *Patriotism and Piety: Medieval Panegyrics on St. Gregory the Illuminator* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005). By the fourteenth century, commentary on the symbolism of Gregory's various tortures was being produced. For example, according to an unpublished sermon of Yovhannēs Kolotik (1370?-1443) found in J1327, 213, Gregory's having been suspended upside down symbolizes nine things, among them: the fact that human feet were originally intended to walk the upward path; the descent of Christ into the world; and the planting of the human 'root' [i.e., the head] in the ground of grace.

2.6 His left hand is upon my head and his right hand embraces me.

He repeats this in another place: 'Length of life is at her right hand, and on her left hand are glory and wealth' (Prv 3:16) [Nyssa 856 A]. Now this means that there is no other fulfillment for my love or expression of my heart but to cling to Him, and to see Him: though various trials and tribulations come upon me, he will hold his right hand and his left hand as my only shade and protection.¹³⁰

The bride says to the maidens

The angels, and humans who have become angelic,¹³¹ are called *maidens*.

¹³⁰ Perhaps an allusion to Ws 5:17.

¹³¹ In Armenian, as in other traditions, there are many references to living 'the angelic life', in particular as a goal for monastics. Its desirable qualities included celibacy and continual worship of God. Ideas on the relationship between human and angelic life were connected to ideas on the parallels between the ranks of clergy and the ranks of angels, and, in broader terms, on the replacement of the class of fallen, faithless angels by the class of saved, faithful human beings. John of Mayrivank' (c. 575–c. 640) is one of the earliest Armenian writers on the latter topics ('Analysis of the Catholic Church', 70–75). He cites as authorities both Ps-Dionysus the Areopagite, and Saint Gregory the Illuminator. For the teaching of Gregory on the taking of human beings into the ranks of the angels see *Teaching of St. Gregory* § 364, 596 and 674. *Homily 16* in Saint Gregory the Illuminator's *Discourses* also mentions the replacement of the fallen angels with 'the meek and humble' (p. 187b). See also *Teaching of St. Gregory* §640. Some centuries after Gregory of Narek, Vardan the Great Arewelts'i (1200?–1271) in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (M1267, 5r) wrote that 'man was accounted among the nine ranks of angels, as the tenth'. The Catholicos Nersēs Shnorhali (1166–1173), in the part of his pastoral encyclical addressed to priests, bases his explanation of the Armenian word for the season of Pentecost (*yinunk'*) on the nine (*inunk'*) ranks of angels, among whose ranks humans celebrate the wedding of Christ and the Church. *Ēndhanrakan T'ught'k'* [General Epistles] 64.

2.7 I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and the forces of the field, that you raise up and wake love, while he wishes.

This world is referred to as a *field* [Nyssa 856 A]. Heaven is as well.¹³² And the *power and force of the field* is God, through whom the world was established—and the heavens, too—and remains bound together and locked¹³³ by the immovable *power and force of the field*; that is, God.

It is the angels and humanity, who dwell in the *fields*, who are mentioned as being *adjured*. Thus, 'by that *force* do I adjure you to rise and pray, and to *arouse* that selfsame *love*, Christ, entirely!' This is what the Lord Himself commanded us to pray: 'Thy will be done', He said, 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10).

Thus, those who were *adjured* are the *daughters* of the heavenly *Jerusalem*, the angels, and the saints who are from this earth.

Hearing the voice of the groom, the bride says

2.8 The voice of my Nephew!

See how, though she recognizes the hidden things before confessing them with her mouth, she pauses in announcing them, so that others too may recognize His justice. For if He is merciful, He is also just in judgment. Her calling out to Him, and her eager pleading, are for the payment of our debts' account.

When the Bride, that is, the Church which is from the gentiles, cried out to the maidens to *take her to the house of wine* and not away from the Groom's presence, as was appointed for

¹³² This is apparently an allusion to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43), and the parable of the treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44).

¹³³ References to the locks of the earth, heaven and hell are to be found in Jb 26:13; 38:6, and in Jonah 2:6.

transgressors,¹³⁴ and when she *adjured the daughters of Jerusalem to arouse love*, until His good will towards humanity might be accomplished, the Groom did not wait for the pleading of intercessors, but having heard the supplication of her who besought Him, He announced a reconciliation, and ran to meet her, as it says in the Gospel in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15). For He goes about seeking the ones who are worthy, and those who love Him and seek His will, having recognized it by foresight.

*The bride says
The voice of my Nephew; behold he comes running
upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.*

She calls *voice* that which we heard from the prophets: 'As we have heard, so have we also seen' (Ps 47:8) [Nyssa 861 A]; that is, the Word of God 'Who in many partial ways and with many archetypes spoke to our fathers through the prophets, at the end of these days He spoke to us through His son' (Heb 1:1-2). This is what it means, *Behold he comes running upon the mountains, leaping upon the hills*. The tyranny of Satan he calls *mountains and hills*, which He trod down by His coming. As the Prophet said, 'The mountains and hills were moved, they shook, and trembling seized them' (Na 1:5).¹³⁵ The Lord gave to the apostles the same authority over mountains; not only to *skip upon the mountains of sin*, but even to send them into the sea (Mt 21:21) [Nyssa 861 D-864 A].

¹³⁴ References to banishment from the divine presence are many. Ps 50:13 comes to mind at once, as do the parables of the wedding guest without a wedding garment (Mt 22) and of the unprofitable servant (Mt 25). Jesus' description of the Judgment in Mt 25 includes the command to the goats on the left hand to depart from the Judge's presence.

¹³⁵ This may be a conflation of Na 1:5 and Ps 47:6, where the same vocabulary is applied to the kingdoms of the earth.

2.9 *My Nephew is like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bethel.*

Though this is not particularly appropriate, she compares her Nephew to a *roe* because of its eyesight. Even before the creation He saw what pertained to humanity; as it says, 'Before He created you from the womb, I knew you' (Jer 1:5). Since there is no better sight among the beasts than the *roe's*, for that reason she makes it the metaphor for Christ's vision.

The *hart*, too, kills snakes, as the Lord did the invisible Serpent. Upon the mountains of Bethel; in Hebrew *Bethel* means heaven, where He brings those who have been saved from the Serpent [Nyssa 864 B].

*The bride gives a sign of the groom to the maidens
Behold, he stood behind our wall,*

He calls the body which was from the Virgin, *wall*.

rising to the window,

He calls the prophets *the window*.

looking through the lattice.

That is, *through* the Law. In other words, in former times the light of the godhead shone upon us *through* these things; then, later, it did so through His coming in the flesh from the Virgin [Nyssa 864 C].

2.10 *My Nephew answered me and said, Arise and come, my Near One, my beauty, my dove,*

This is the call that came through Christ, who said, 'Come to me all you who labor' (Mt 11:28), and so on. He says *my beauty*,

because of the washing of the *dove*; *my dove*, because of her having put on the Spirit; *my Near One* because we have become sharers in Christ's body (Eph 3:6).

for, behold, the winter has passed,

He calls the idol worship which had spread worldwide, *winter*. It *has passed*, moreover, by the self same coming of the *Nephew*, who is Christ [Nyssa 865 C]. Likewise,

2.11 *the rains have passed; leaving, they have gone away.*

This stands for the deceit of Satan, who takes on the shape of a good thing (2 Cor 11:14). The *rain* is one of destruction, like that in the days of the Flood, by which the demons were expelled; that is, *leaving they have gone away*.

2.12 *Flowers have appeared in our land, the time for pruning has come.*

By this he indicates the beauty of the spring which came through Christ in the winter of persecution. He calls the crowd of the Just, flourishing in virtue and piety, *flowers*. *The time has come for pruning*; for cutting off and removing the polluted from among the saints.¹³⁶

The voice of the turtledove was heard in our land.

As birds in springtime twitter and are spread out across the land, so also at the coming of this spiritual springtime do the saints rejoice, especially the apostles and prophets, and *vardapets*, and those who through their preaching bless God night and day with

¹³⁶ This is perhaps an allusion to Jn 15:2,6.

angelic and spiritual songs. This is what *The voice of the turtledove was heard in our land* means.¹³⁷

2.13 *The vineyards blossomed, and gave forth their fragrance.*

He refers to as a *vineyard* those faithful people who *blossomed* into a variety of diverse colors and fruits and *fragrances*; one person through martyrdom, another through various virtues, and yet another through good works.

Rise and come, my Near One, my beautiful one, my dove, my perfect one,

He repeated the same original, previous words, affirming his call, 'Arise and come, not through *the window* and *the lattice*—that is, through the prophets or the Law—but at this, My own call!' By repeating the words, he indicated that one does not come to a halt on the way to the Kingdom, so long as one is in the flesh. As the Lord says, 'Oh, rise, let us go hence' (Mt 26:46). This is also consonant with the Theologian's interpretation.¹³⁸

2.14 *And come, my dove, under the shelter of that rock, near the retaining wall.*

See, although she has become a *dove*, yet he demands that she continually increase in purity, and not consider herself to be

¹³⁷ In his comments on this verse, Thomson points out a parallel with *Teaching of Gregory* §655–658 and the description of birds—not only turtledoves, but cranes and swallows—as images of the resurrection. Indeed, §641–658 are all descriptive of the resurrection as the Great Springtime. In his *Exhortation to a Virtuous Life*, Gregory of Narek calls the 'general resurrection' a 'spiritual springtime', when all those who have partaken in Christ's body and blood will 'bud, renewed truly and with immortal life' (*Writings*, Venice 1840, p. 490).

¹³⁸ The interpretation to which Gregory refers is not known to me.

perfect in purity; 'And let him who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall' (1 Cor 10:12).

Under the shelter of that rock. He calls Christ a *rock*, for the Apostle says, 'The rock was Christ himself' (1 Cor 10:4).

And he calls the commandments a *wall*, as it is in Scripture. Now, he orders her hereafter to conform with the Gospel and its preaching, and not with the Law [Nyssa 877 B-D]. To this the Apostle testifies: 'Christ is of no effect for you, if you are justified by the Law' (Gal 5:4).

And near the retaining wall. It is as if he says that by keeping the Gospel commandments you are not far from the Law: as the Apostle says, 'The fulfillment of the Law is Christ' (Rom 10:4). And the Lord Himself says, 'I came to fulfill the Law' (Mt 5:17). So by carrying out what has been fulfilled, you draw *near to the wall*, that is, to the Law.¹³⁹

*Show me your face, and let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet, and your face is beautiful.*

These the Song of Songs says are the words of the Groom. Gregory of Nyssa divides it, and says it is the words of the Bride. [Nyssa 880 A-B] We agree with this.

Now, having become a *dove*, the Bride beseeches the *rock*, understood to be Christ, 'Show me your face, and do not speak to me any longer through the prophets and the Law! Instead, insofar as you are visible to corporeal creatures, show me your face visibly, so that I may see it and be sated with your glory's appearing. Insofar as human hearing can bear it, let me hear your *voice* so that, grazing in the shade of your gospel preaching, I shall not go after a foreign shepherd. For if your *voice* was so enticing to me through the *window*—that is through the multitude of the proph-

¹³⁹ The identification of the Law with a wall is also found in Gregory Nazianzen *Oration* 45.xii.

ets—how much more shall it be so if I am made worthy of seeing your *face*, of hearing the good news of my own salvation?'

The groom says to the maidens

2.15 *Let us catch us the little foxes that spoil the vines,
so that our vines may flourish.*¹⁴⁰

This He says to the angels, which are ministering spirits, sent for the service of humanity. On the other hand, He says it even more to the apostles, who became 'hunters' of the entire universe [Nyssa 881 A-B]. First they hunted the *fox* to destruction, expelling him from the vineyard. It is Satan that he calls a *fox*. A *vineyard* is what he calls the Church, which is the souls of the faithful—whom the apostles snatched from the claws of the *fox*, who was the opponent of the truth—so that they were transferred from death to life (Jn 5:24).

The Lord Himself too, when the apostles returned rejoicing and said, 'Lord, even devils obey us in your name', told them, 'Lo, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and on all the power of the enemy as well' (Lk 10:19). He who at another time called Satan a 'mountain' and a 'dragon' and a 'prince', here by contrast calls him a *fox*, and a small one at that, because of the awesome power which the apostles received over him.

The bride says this

2.16 *My Nephew is mine and I am his, who shepherds
among the lilies, until the day dawns, and the shadows
disperse.*

The Bride, seeing herself liberated from the predations of the *fox*, joyfully gives herself to the One made earthly, who took down the

¹⁴⁰ The identification of the fox with Satan is also made in *Physiologus*: 'The scribe heard from the Lifegiver, "Foxes have dens"; and in the Song of Songs, "let us catch the little foxes that spoil the vineyards"' (Muradyan, *Physiologus*, 117. For full reference, see n. 142, below.)

wall of separation (Eph 2:14). And because the wall of the Law no longer divides her from the One she desires, then she says, 'I am my Nephew's, and my Nephew is mine' [Nyssa 882 D]. And again, 'Because I have tasted of His love and seen His alluring face, and heard His enticing voice, I am in Him and He in me.'¹⁴¹ So hereafter neither earthly desire nor need can separate me from Him'. This indeed came to pass, and we saw this demonstrated in the martyrs and the ascetics. As the Apostle says, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation or difficulty, or persecution?' and so on (Rom 8:35).

*Who shepherds among the lilies,
until the day dawns and the shadows disperse.*

That is, no longer does He feed them with grass, which is the food of bestial men. It is the pleasures of the flesh which one refers to as 'grass'; however it is not with that, but rather with spiritual food, that He feeds them. Indeed all the saints ate and marveled at it, and spurned vain desires. They wait in the hope of the *daunting* of that *day* which is the final day, when they shall not be moved—in other words, they shall not pass away—forever. Then it is that the saints will slake the boundless thirst they have for Christ the Groom.

2.17 *Again, my Nephew is like a roe or a young hart
upon the incense bearing mountains.*

This means, 'See the works of the wicked with your sharp eyes, you who sit in the heights, and trample the serpent and the dragon'. It is indeed the nature of *harts*, to tread on snakes and kill them¹⁴² [Nyssa 884 C].

¹⁴¹ An allusion to Jn 17:23.

¹⁴² The enmity of the hart towards serpents/dragons is described in the *Physiologus*, which tells us that the hart blows water down the hole in which a serpent is

— CHAPTER THREE —

3.1 *On my bed at night I sought him whom my soul
loves. I sought him and did not find him, I called him,
and he did not answer me.*

These phrases require many words of explanation, and it is not to be concluded in a few. Nonetheless, I will relate a few; I refer those who desire more expansive statements to Gregory of Nyssa [Nyssa 892–893 C].

When the Bride's knowledge had progressed through the many metaphors that He listed, and she attained to the pinnacle of this knowledge of Christ at which we find ourselves, she thought that her knowledge had come to a resting point; as it were, 'Now I have arrived!' She became careless. Like a person tired and resting in *bed*, likewise she rested, as if *on her bed*, from having sought out great treasure—that is, the great, enlightened, true knowledge to which she had attained through her desire.

She rested, as if *on a bed*, and she did not recall Paul's saying, 'We know more or less, and we prophesy more or less' (1 Cor 13:9), and 'Now I understand more or less' (1 Cor 13:12). In comparison with the life to come, he calls this life 'night' (Rom 13:12), dark and tenebrous. The spirit is concealed by the body as if in a house, or even in a prison, invisible to those standing outside. The Prophet speaks of it as prison and bonds, saying 'You have broken my bonds' (Ps 115:16), and 'Lord, take my soul from prison, that I may praise your name' (Ps 141:8).

hiding, and then kills the emerging reptile with its hoofs. For a new edition and translation of the Armenian version see Gohar Muradyan *Physiologus. The Greek and Armenian Versions with a Study of Translation Techniques*. Hebrew University Armenian Studies 6 (Louvain: Peeters, 2005). For general notes on the work, see Ferdinand Holthausen, 'Zum Physiologus', *Anglia Beiblatt* 33 (April 1992) 102–103. For some patristic applications, see Ursula Treu, 'The Physiologus and the Early Fathers', *Studia Patristica* 24 (1993) 197–200.