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TREASURY

THE UNJUST STEWARD

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St. Nersess Shnorhali

The Economy of God

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THE

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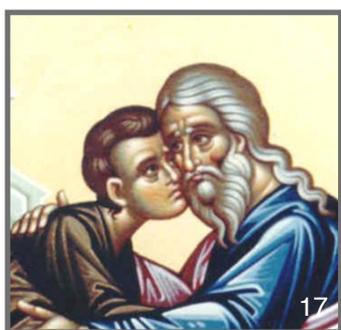
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Front cover image: Parable of the Unjust Steward. Dated 2012. Oil on canvas. 80 × 70. Artist Andrey Mironov

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# THE FELLOWSHIP OF ST. VOSKI

Nor Voskiank/**Նոր Ոսկեանք** is a fellowship of men and women working toward the revival and restoration of Armenian Orthodox theology and life within the Armenian Church at large. The fellowship is named after St. Voski and his companions (the Voskians) who were a group of Christian martyrs and monastics from the first century, many of whom were students of St. Thaddeus. According to tradition, St. Thaddeus ordained as their leader a priest called Chrysos (Greek for "gold," Armenian "voski"), and thereafter the group came to be known as the Voskians.

In the spirit of the Voskians, Nor Voskiank seeks to support the cultivation of a thriving, united, worldwide Armenian Christian community through prayer, fellowship, and the publication of practical educational resources covering the entire breadth of Christian life as lived, interpreted and testified to by the Armenian Church since ancient times. The Treasury/**Գանձարան** is published quarterly and subscriptions are available by request. To contact us or donate, please visit us at

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# THE MANY GRACES OF SAINT NERSESS SHNORHALI

by V. Rev. Fr. Daniel Findikyan

St. Nersess of Gla (1102-1173AD), known as *Շնորհալի/Shnorhalee*, “the Gracious One,” is one of the most beloved saints and prolific catholicoses of the Armenian Church. He must also be counted among the greatest luminaries in the history of Christendom. An exceptional theologian and patriarch, he discussed doctrinal differences with the most distinguished church leaders of his day, East and West. One non-Armenian scholar has referred to him as the first modern ecumenist on account of his innovative approaches toward Christian unity, ideas that would only resurface at the turn of the twentieth century. The “Gracious One” is also renowned for the dozens of sacred hymns and other liturgical works that he composed, exquisite pieces that appreciably enlarged the Armenian *Book of Hours* [*Ճամբար/Zhamakeerk*] and the *Book of Hymns* [*Շարակնգ/Sharagnots*].

Among the Catholicos’ lesser-known works is his splendid *Letter of Consolation*, written on the occasion of the sudden death of the young son of an unknown “eastern prince.” In this expansive poem, St. Nersess displays his tender compassion for someone who has experienced what is perhaps the most harrowing and inexplicable pain that one can suffer in this life, the death of a child. With great sensitivity, the Gracious One touches the wounds of the grieving father, as he weaves a tapestry of hopeful images and allusions from Sacred Scripture to bring the healing of Jesus Christ to bear.

Indeed, the poem amounts to a beautiful and persuasive proclamation of the Gospel, an engrossing sermon in which St. Nersess celebrates



the central mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ and targets that hope to one man's suffering, one man's personal hell. As is typical of the Gracious One's writings, and of Armenian Church literature in general, the poem is fueled by the Bible. The allusions to Sacred Scripture are pervasive, overlapping and often quite subtle.

Also noteworthy is how St. Nersess draws upon aspects of the specifically *Armenian* Christian experience. In particular, the Catholicos refers to the Armenian alphabet. Armenians see God's hand at work in the miraculous creation of their alphabet and they attribute to it almost sacramental power. St. Nersess also alludes to a little-known vision by King Drtad's Queen. The Gracious One reads Armenian history as the story of God at work in the midst of a small nation. He reminds us that the modern inclination to define a "secular" or "nationalistic" Armenian identity apart from Jesus Christ is a modern perversion that has no place in the authentic worldview of the Armenian people.

Consequently St. Nersess' poem is an embodiment of the Gospel. For the Good News of Jesus Christ is not a message to be preached, but a life to be lived. The Gracious One's poem is a profoundly personal gift to a grieving man. St. Nersess responds to one instance of the fallen state of this world by giving of himself; by summoning all of his God-given gifts—theological, intellectual, ethnic, spiritual, moral—and offering something of beauty that only he could create as his contribution to the healing of a fallen world. Is this not exactly what God the Father did? Heartbroken for the forlorn state of humanity, God gave us something beautiful and powerful, something from God's inner being—something profoundly personal, some ONE that only God could give—God's only-begotten son Jesus Christ, to heal the pain and corruption of this world.

So St. Nersess' *Letter of Consolation* is a beautiful poem, an eloquent proclamation of the Gospel, and a compelling illustration of what God has called each of us to do: in communion with Christ's body, the Church, to bring healing to the world, case-by-case, person-by-person, day-by-day, as we encounter the pain and decadence of this gravely ailing world.

The *Letter of Consolation* is the work of a poet of the highest order. To read the poem in the original Armenian is to be enchanted and dizzied by the Gracious One's rhetorical acrobatics. The work is first of all an acrostic, in which the first letter of each successive two-line verse constitutes the successive letters of the alphabet plus the words, "by Nersess Catholicos of the Armenians." In addition, the entire poem is in iambic tetrameter: each verse consists of two lines, each one containing four two-syllable



units or "feet," in which the first syllable is unaccented and the second is accented. As if that were not enough, the entire poem rhymes. The verses comprising the alphabet acrostic are divided into three parts. The lines of the first part end with "-een"; the lines of the second part end with "-ov"; and the lines of the third part end with "-an." The rest of the lines end with "-ar."

It would take a translator much more competent than I to render all of these devices into English. I have been content to give a fairly close translation of the original text while preserving its meter, and employing rhyme within each verse. The resulting translation can do no justice to the magnitude of the Gracious One's artistry and Christian conviction, only offer English readers one more glimpse into the *Treasury* of the Armenian Church.

A LETTER OF CONSOLATION  
BY ST. NERSESS SHNORHALI  
TO A CERTAIN EASTERN PRINCE  
ON THE UNTIMELY DEATH  
OF HIS SON

Թուղթ Մխիթարութեան  
Առումն Իշխան Արեւելեան  
Վասն Որդւոյ Իւրոյ  
Տարածամ' Մեռելոյ

**Ն** God's hope divine no person sees,  
Saint Paul's unfailing Word decrees.<sup>1</sup>

**Բ** Yet those who look with their heart's eye,  
With faith that same hope they will spy.

**Գ** The soul will reap rich gems unseen,  
No more to crave vain things that sheen.

**Դ** They'll look to that world up on high,  
Where grief and sorrow can't abide.

**Ե** Just wipe away sin's inky smog,  
Your inner spirit's tearful fog.

**Զ** Your precious boy for whom you yearn,  
For him no more your heart will burn.

**Է** Abode of the beatified—  
Your boy will be there by their side.

**Ը** Among the angels nine in grade,  
The first enrolled in Heaven's shade.

**Թ** Your son now shares the dignity  
Of princes, noble sovereignty.

**Ժ** The legacy of Sion there—  
Your son today declared an heir.

Աստեւ է յոյսն աստուածային,  
'Ստ Առաքելոյ անսուտ բանին.  
Բայց որք բանան զաչքս սրբտին,  
Այնք հաւատով ի նա հային:  
Գանձեն զաննիւթ գանձն ի հոգին,  
Եւ ոչ ցանկան նիւթականին,  
Դիտեն զաշխարհն զայն վերին,  
Ուր ոչ է սուգ ոչ տրտմութիւն:  
Եւ դու թէ զմէզ մեղաց մըթին,  
Մաքրես յոգւոյդ յաւաց բըբին.  
Զմանուկ տըղայդ ըզբաղձալին  
Այլ ոչ ողբաս կըսկըծագին:  
Էրանելեացն քաղաքին  
Զնա բնակակից նայիս նոցին.  
Ընդ հրեշտակացն իննեակ դասին,  
Եւ անդրանկաց գրելոց յերկին:  
Թագազարմից լուսերամին  
Համապայծառ է պանծալին.  
Ժառանգ վերինն Սիոնին,  
Ժառանգակից որդւոց նորին:  
Ի գիրկըս Հօրն է գրգուէլին,  
Յոյժ գերագոյն անառակին.  
Լոյս աշխարհի Հօր Միածնին  
Յեղբայրութիւն հրաւիրելին:  
Խընդա՛ մեծաւ այսու յուսով  
Սթափեսա՛ ի սգոյդ ըսփոփելով  
Ծանի՛ր զբնութիւնըս մեր մարմնով  
Մահկանացու անդարձ վըճռով:  
Կա՛ց ի կանգուն օրինակով՝  
Զոր մեզ ետուն հարբըն գըրով:  
Հայեա՛ց զԱբէլ արեամբ մահով  
Հօրն առաջի մեռանելով:  
Ձեզ զԱբրահամ տիպ առնելով  
Զորդին տուողին նըւիրելով:  
Ղամբար մանկանց ողջակիզով  
Զմինն ընդ երից ընծայելով:  
ԶՈխացելոց խորին թըրով  
Մանկանց եւթեանց նըմանելով.

Մակաբեանց մօրքն Շամունով,  
Զորս Աստուծոյ տայր ցընծալով:

Յիշեա՛ եւ զկեանքն տապանով  
Ըզմարդկան մահ մեռանելով:

Նոյն ի յերիւր օր յառնելով  
Եւ մեզ ետ յոյս նըմանելով:

Շինէ գրակեալս նորոգելով,  
Յանմահ բնութիւն փոփոխելով՝

Որք հինգ տաղանդ պատուիրանով  
Շահին ըզգործարն հաւատով:

Չառք որ չարեացն են գործարան,  
Յառնեն ի մահն անմահական,

Պատին բոցովն անշիջական,  
Ուտին յորդանցն՝ որ անվախձան:

Ջերմ արտասուաց կարօտանան,  
Որ անօգուտ է յետ մահունան.

Ռամ վարուց հետեւեցան,  
Վասն այնորիկ անդադար լան:

Սուրբ տըղային ոչ լալոյ ձայն,  
Այլ երգ խընդման վայելչական.

Վասն որոյ զգոյն ըզտըխրական  
Սեաւ ըզգեստիդ ի յանձէդ հան.

Տըրտմական կիրքն առցեն վախձան,  
Դառն արտասուք ձեր եւ կական:

Բոտեա՛ զերկունքս թախծական,  
Զոր մահ մանկանըն ձեզ ծընան.

Յոյ՛ց զակամայդ կամայական,  
Տալ ստեղծողին յօժարական:

Իւծեալ մարմնոյն՝ որ ի տապան,  
Շանի՛ր զհոգին յերկնից խորան.

Փառօք փայլէ յարքայութեան,  
Շագէ նըման արեգական:

Քեզ մըխիթար սակաւ այս բան  
Չափով տառիցըս հայկական:



Ի

The Father clasps his precious one,  
Most excellent Prodigal Son.

Լ

The Father's First, the world's true Light,  
His brother now by God's invite.

Խ

With this great hope, rejoice take heart!  
Cheer up and let your grief depart.

Օ

Recall this body physical,  
Which God declared to be mortal—

Կ

He raised it up and set it straight,  
The fathers' writings do relate.

Ի

Regard good Abel's bloody death.  
He gave the Father his last breath.

Ձ

God gave a son to Abraham,  
Who gifted him back with a ram.

Դ

Burnt sacrifice, his precious Son,  
To Daniel's three youths he adds one.

Ճ

Still greater numbers we behold,  
The death of seven brothers told.<sup>2</sup>

Մ

Shamuna of the Maccabees,  
Her sons she offered God to please.

Յ

Recall as well that Life entombed—  
Christ put to death our human gloom.

Ն

Arising early that third day,  
He gave us hope, showed us the way.

Շ

He mends the broken, makes us new,  
The gift of deathlessness in lieu.



Նայեա՛ց զոր ետ քեզ թաղնաբար  
 Հայրըն գըլթած եւ բարերար:

Եհան զորդին քո յերկրէ չար  
 Ի հրեշտակաց բիւրոցըն պար:

Բենական լուսոյն անձառ,  
 Հուպ եւ տեսող ըզնա արար:

Սըրբոցն որ անդ համագումար,  
 Եւ ընտրելոցըն հաւասար:

Ելթէ յայս յոյս ունիս հանձար,  
 Լինիս հոգւով դու անմոլար:

Սըրտիդ կըրկն որ կայ ի վառ,  
 Փոխի ի ցօղ զըւարթարար:

Ի բաց դիր այժմ՝ ըզգոյդ խաւար,  
 Որ անյուսիցն է տըրտմարար:

Եւ դու ընկա՛լ զսոյն անվըթար,  
 Զյուսացելոցըն զուարձարար:

Կենդանին եւ կենարար,  
 Այն որ ձայնիւ կոչեաց զՂազար:

Առ քեզ գոչէ աստուածաբար,  
 Լուծցէ ըզսուգ քոյ եւ զաշխար:

Թագաւորըն կամարար,  
 Որ զՄարեմանսն ուրախ արար:

Ուրախութիւն քեզ անվըձար  
 Պարգեւեցէ աստուածաբար:

Ղօղիչ զարտօսըն զայն յերկար  
 Արտասուելովըն մարդկաբար:

Ի քէն բարձցէ զսըգոյդ խաւար,  
 Նովին բանիւ կենդանարար:

Կտաւոց մահուն մարմնապատար,  
 Վարշամակին այն մահարար:

Որ քոյ յուսոյն անյուսարար,  
 Եւ հաւատոյդ ծածկոյթ արկար:

Սաստեա՛ նոցին եւ գանիւ հա՛ր,  
 Զի փախիցեն ծառայաբար:

Ի քէն մերկեա՛ զգեստ տըրտմարար,  
 Զերդ ըզպատան մահուն Ղազար:

Հայեա՛ց ի կինըն Կղոպատար,  
 Որ վասն որդւոյն անմըխիթար:

Աչօքն ետես լուսապայծառ  
 Թագիւ տըճնեալ արքայաբար:

Որոց Յիսուս ձեզ տիրաբար  
 Յաւուր մեծին երկնադումար:

Յուցցէ զորդին ձեր գերափառ,  
 Օրհնէ՛ք նովաւ զտէրն անդադար:

**Ո** Like those investing talents five,  
 Rewarded for their faith they thrive.

**Զ** Depraved ones mass-producing lies,  
 To death unending they will rise.

**Պ** Encircled by hellfire’s blaze,  
 Forever food for worms they laze.

**Ջ** They yearn for warm tears of remorse,  
 Which after death are no recourse.

**Ռ** Their lives on Earth corrupt, carefree.  
 So now they weep perpetually.

**Ս** Your holy son sheds not a tear,  
 A song of bliss he sings with cheer!

**Վ** So peel away the doleful black,  
 And strip those dark clothes off your back.

**Տ** The grievous pain will cease indeed—  
 The bitter weeping, tears that bleed.

**Բ** Abort the throes of agony,  
 Born when your dear son passed away.

**Յ** Against your will yet willingly,  
 Give to the Maker happily.

**Ի** His woven body in the grave—  
 See there the Spirit, heaven’s nave.

**Փ** He shines in splendor with the King,  
 The rising sun the dawn to bring.

**Ք** May these words metered bring relief  
 Armenian letters soothe your grief.



- U** Look what he gave you secretly,  
The caring Father lovingly.
- U** From wicked Earth he snatched your boy—  
To dance with angels there with joy.
- U** The holy Light, deep Mystery—  
God drew him close and let him see.
- U** In concert with the holy ones,  
God's many cherished, chosen sons.
- U** If you can grasp this hope's mandate,  
Your path the Spirit will keep straight.
- U** The burning fire that sears your heart  
Will change to dew, great joy impart.
- U** Now cast aside your gloomy grief  
That breaks the hearts of unbelief.
- U** Accept this gift, my offering.  
To desp'rate ones great joy it brings.
- U** The living One who makes alive,  
Whose voice dead Laz'rus did revive.
- U** Almighty God now calls to you  
To break your sorrow, lift, renew.
- U** The King who filled most willingly—  
The Marys at the tomb with glee.

**Ո** Shall surely bring you happiness—  
 His free and godly gift of bliss.

**Դ** Through hidden teardrops falling straight,  
 For you he weeps, God incarnate.

**Ի** He'll oust that wretched, dark despair  
 The Savior by his Word with care.

**Կ** The funeral shrouds that wrap his frame—  
 Malignant napkins, death proclaimed.

**Ո** With them you covered up your hope,  
 Concealed your faith for which you groped.

**Ս** Rebuke those rags and beat them back!  
 Defeated vassals post-attack.

**Ի** Strip off that tragic, doleful suit,  
 The death shroud Laz'rus wore is moot.

**Ն** Take Cleopatra, Dikran's bride,<sup>3</sup>  
 Heart-broken since her son had died.

**Է** Her eyes beheld in radiant light,  
 Her son crowned regally in sight.

**Ո** On that great day in heaven's throng,  
 In his dominion, Jesus, strong—

**Յ** Will show your son in glory's blaze.  
 Exalt the Lord now and always.



Very Rev. Fr. Michael Daniel Findikyan, PhD, is Director of the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center and Professor of Liturgical Studies at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary

(1) Titus 1:1 (2) The full story is told in 2Maccabees 8. The woman is also referred to numerous times in 4Maccabees 15-18. (3) Cleopatra of Pontus, young wife of King Dikran the Great. One of her three sons, also named Dikran, was taken captive in Rome by Pompei in 66BC. He later escaped, and with his older brother Zariadres, attempted to seize the crown from their father. The latter killed both sons.

The *Letter of Consolation* has been translated from the Constantinople, 1824 edition of St. Nersess' epic, *Յիսուս Որդի* [Heesooos Vortee], *Jesus the Son*, pp. 305-310.

Fellowship of St. Voski  
P.O. Box 377  
Sutton, MA 01590



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