The Symbolic Significance of Medieval Armenian Canon Tables

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The highly ornamented illuminations surrounding medieval Canon Tables, which are found in the opening folios of many Gospel books, are rich in visual symbolism. Particularly with the Eastern medieval traditions, their colourful motifs of birds, fruit and flowers are symbolic in a unique, psychological way which requires careful interpretation. The case of the medieval Armenian tradition of Canon Table illumination is particularly interesting and will be the subject of the following discussion. Their symbolism must be interpreted, not as iconography, but as a spiritual and psychological preparation for the soul of the viewer as he or she prepares for the awesome experience of reading the Gospel texts.

The Western view of images and icons is that while they are acceptable, their purpose is a didactic one; to instruct the illiterate or simple folk. While Western images may contain representations of what must be worshipped, no person, regardless of education should worship the images themselves. Pope Gregory the Great of the late sixth century highlighted this view in his letter reprimanding Serenus of Marseilles who had begun destroying sacred images: “It is one thing to worship a picture; it is another to learn through the picture’s story what is to be worshipped. For what writing supplies to readers painting offers to uneducated viewers; for in painting even the ignorant can see what course they should follow, and in painting the illiterate can read.”¹ Viewing an image is equated here with

¹ Gregory I. Epistola xxii ad Serenum Massiliensem episcopum PL 77, 1128.
reading and literacy; the visual content of an image is not meant to inspire pleasure but religious contemplation. The situation in the medieval East, as we shall see, is vastly different. In the following pages I will attempt not a comparison of Eastern and Western icons but a discussion of the differences in the philosophy of art of the two branches of Christianity. In the West, images were for the illiterate and no place was reserved for visual sensuality in art. In the East however, the pleasures of the senses were for the initiate and not for the uneducated. To illustrate this point, I will take for my example the elaborately decorated Canon Tables of the Armenian tradition which are neither didactic tools nor iconic vehicles for worship. They serve a psychological function: to prepare the soul of the viewer to read the Gospel texts which follow.

Canon Tables, which are found in the opening pages of many medieval Gospel manuscripts, are keys to the overlapping material in the four books of the New Testament Gospels. This cross-index system was invented in the fourth century by Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine.¹ The tables quickly became an integral part of the standard edition of the Gospels as they were translated into Greek, Syriac, Slavonic, Armenian and other languages. Our primary concern here is the elaborate decorations which surround the Canon Tables. According to Carl Nordenfalk, the Armenian decorated Canon Tables are one of the earliest Christian contributions to the art of book illumination.³ He explains this by pointing out that the Armenian tradition has preserved examples of Canon Tables which stand closer

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to the Eusebian archetype than any other surviving manuscripts.\textsuperscript{4} This is shown for example in the preservation of the traditional ten page format of the Armenian Canon Tables which reached its peak of ornamental richness and luxury of materials in the Cilician period.\textsuperscript{5} (Fig. 1) In other traditions the set of tables was spread over twelve or more pages, deviating from the Eusebian original. As will be seen later, the 10 page format of the Canon Tables holds symbolic significance in itself.

\textsuperscript{4} The earliest surviving Armenian Canon Table is from the Sanasarian Gospels dated at 986. This is found in the Institute for Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran), in Yerevan, Armenia.

Fig 1. – The Tenth Canon Table, Freer MS 44.17, fol. 11 (1253 AD). From the Freer Art Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.
In addition to its adherence to the original cross-indexing system of Eusebius, Armenian Canon Tables are also striking in that their importance was acknowledged and cultivated in the writings by medieval authors. It is only within the Armenian tradition that a genre of literature developed which concerns itself specifically with the interpretation of the symbolism of the lush decorations surrounding the Canon Tables. The most important commentary on the symbolism of Armenian Canon Tables was written by the twelfth-century theologian, astronomer, musician and catholicos of Armenia, Nerses Shnorhali. Nerses’ commentary appears as a preface to his Commentary of the Gospel of Matthew. This placement alone suggests, as we shall see later, that these Canon Tables are more than just practical tools but possess spiritual significance.

The canon tables are covered in decorations of colourful abstract shapes as well as flora, fauna and food. The primary and most encompassing symbolism present in the tables is that of paradise. The purpose of these representations is not narrative but purely suggestive. In spite of humanity’s sinful condition, Nerses insists: “[man is] in the image of God, and Paradise is his abode, and the Tree of Life is the occasion of his immortality.” In other words, the recollection of paradise from which man originated, and the mysteries it contains, leads him to desire the food immortal, which is Christ. Therefore, Paradise at once symbolises the beginning and the end of sacred history, from Incarnation to Ascension. Paradise, containing the beginning and end of sacred history, is representative of earlier

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8 Nerses Shnorhali. *Meknutiwn Surb Avetaranin* (Constantinople, 1825), 5-12.  
promises and types and their fulfilment, as is written in the New Testament. In this light, the Canon Tables, which help us to navigate through the recurring, layered and patterned events in sacred history, become the ideal vehicle for paradisiacal symbolism.

As mentioned before, the illuminations of these tables are not didactic, neither are they iconic with the purpose of being vehicles for worship. As preludes to the Gospel texts they function as a means to psychological preparation for the greater vision to be experienced through the reading of the Holy Gospels. Nerses draws an analogy to the encampment of the Israelites at Sinai when they were required to wash and purify themselves before being allowed into the vision of the Lord. He characterizes the Canon Tables as “baths of the sight and hearing for those approaching the soaring peaks of God.”

As visual aids for meditation they prepare the soul by removing distractions and focusing the viewer’s attention on the Christian mysteries of faith. Equally interesting is the fact that Nerses was also a prolific composer of Armenian hymns, called sharakans to which he attached the same ideology; just as the Canon Tables are ‘baths for the sight’, sharakans are ‘baths of hearing’ which function to prepare and cleanse the hearts of ‘those approaching the soaring peaks of God’. If we recall the words of Gregory the Great, this psychological and mystical power attributed to art in the East had no place in Western art.

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10 Nerses Shnorhali. Meknutiwn Surb Awetaranin (Constantinople, 1825), 5-12.
In addition to this open acceptance of sensuality, Nerses also makes clear that these delights are not for simple people but the initiates: “The mystery is not apparent to all, but (only) to a few, and (its) entirety (is known) only to God.”\footnote{Nerses Shnorhali. \textit{Meknutiwn Surb Awetaranin} (Constantinople, 1825), 5-12.} Clearly, this is in exact opposition to the Western view which we recall says that images and visual depictions are for the simple folk and not the educated elite. These perfected pleasures in the form of splendid colours and visual sensuality are gifts from God which he has prepared to aid his loved ones in their spiritual ascent:

The Garden (is) understood as having erected at its centre the Tree of Life, for from the house of the Lord that water is caused to spring which flows in life everlasting; it is this which is walled around, not by the terrifying fire and the flaming Seraphic sword, but by the luxurious floral pictures and colourful, splendid ornament in the form of the drawing of the canon table.\footnote{Ibid.}

Another key point, which Nerses touches on indirectly in the above quote, is that, in Eastern art, symbolism must be kept hidden. In the canon tables we do not have literal or narrative representations of Paradise, only more abstract pieces of paradisiacal symbolism which suggest the profound mysteries to the viewer. An example of this is Nerses’ interpretation of the pomegranate seen depicted in the Canon Tables, which refers to the sweetness of the New Law within the bitter rind of the Old Testament. Also interesting is the symbol of the peacock, two of which are found at the top of the table in fig 1. The

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
Physiologus, which was translated into Armenian in Early Christian times, is a document that outlines the Christian symbolism of the animal kingdom. According to the Physiologus:

…the Peacock is the most pleasant of birds of the sky. Comely in form and beautiful in his wings, the peacock walks about and regards himself with pleasure. He struts exaltedly and looks on the world with disdain; but when he casts a glance on his own feet he cries out weeping grievously, for his feet at not in keeping with the rest of his beauty.\footnote{16}

While these interpretations are of course valid and interesting, it must be remembered that symbolism in the East did not function in the straightforward way that it did in much Western art. In other words, similarly portrayed images with identical symbolic value are only Western phenomenon. This is because of the primarily didactic and ‘literary’ function of Western Christian art in the mid medieval period (post 600). Symbolism in Eastern Christian art is much more dynamic and personal and the essence of this symbolism is to remain concealed. Nerses backs this up by stating that the symbolism of the canon tables is to function on a level as defined by St. Paul as the “secret and hidden wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 2:7). As pointed out by Thomas Mathews, the layout of each of the pages of the canon tables is the same, but the decorations change in subtle ways. Examples of this are seen when the headpieces may be repeated but the patterns within change, or when the patterns remain constant but the colours used change. This “diversity invites the viewer to

\footnote{16} Physiologoi gracei, trans. Thomas F. Mathews. 204-05.
explore the visual beauty of the illuminations.”\textsuperscript{17} Interesting to point out here is that while in Western art, the simple repetition of known symbols is enough to pin point their meaning, many Armenian manuscripts, much like their Byzantine cousins have textual labels above the portrayed images.

In addition to visual symbolism, the Canon Tables also represent the unique symbolism found in the Armenian language and its alphabet. The Armenian word for Canon Table is ‘\textit{Khoran}’. Simply translated, the word means ‘canopy’, though it may have multiple meanings including ‘ark’ and ‘altar’. As pointed out by Nersessian, the Holy Altar, which can be referred to as \textit{khoran} is the table on which every Sunday the ‘mystery profound’, Incarnation to Ascension, is celebrated.\textsuperscript{18} As was discussed earlier, this is paramount to the paradisiacal symbolism of the Canon Tables. Fittingly, Nerses suggests an alternate etymology for this word: ‘\textit{khorhrdagan}’ which means mystery.\textsuperscript{19} He then interprets each of the ten Canon Tables as a dwelling for one of the great mysteries of salvation history:

1. The Blessed Trinity; Thrones, Seraphim and Cherubin
2. The Middle Priesthood of the Angels
3. The Last Priesthood of the Angels
4. The Garden of Paradise
5. The Ark of Noah
6. The Altar of Abraham
7. The Holy of Holies
8. The Tabernacle
9. Solomon’s Temple
10. The Holy Catholic Church

\textsuperscript{18} Vrej Nersessian. \textit{Treasures from the ark: 1700 years of Armenian Christian art} (London: British Library, 2001), 80.
\textsuperscript{19} Nerses Shnorhali. \textit{Meknutiwn Surb Awetaranin} (Constantinople, 1825), 5-12.
While, as we saw earlier, Canon Tables of other traditions did not keep to the ten table Eusebian model, the number ten of the Armenian Canon Tables holds much significance. According to Nerses, the number ten was chosen by Eusebius by divine inspiration. It is of course the number of the commandments. It is also “the number of the curtains of the temple, the parts of the body and its senses, the categories of Aristotle, the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, the articles of the Nicene Creed and the ages of the world”. Ten is therefore the number of completeness. Along with the numerical symbolism found in the Canon Tables there is also symbolism in the choice of colours. According to the eighth-century commentary attributed to Stepanos Syunetsi, the first Canon Table is coloured in four colours, red, green, black and blue to signify ‘the symbol of the four elements of the first temple’.

To conclude this brief discussion on the Canon Tables, it would be useful and interesting to point out the characteristic symbolism of the Armenian letters themselves. The Armenian alphabet is said to have been divinely revealed to St. Mesrop Mashtots in the fifth century. While the letters are in fact based on Aramaic and Greek letters, the alphabet is laced with Christian symbolism. The final, thirty-sixth letter of the Armenian alphabet, (K), is based on the cross-like shape and phonetic value of the Greek letter \( \chi \) (chi), but with
an added circle to represent the Chi-Rho combination, called the *Chrismon*, an abbreviation for Christ’s name. According to James R. Russell, “in no Christian culture other than Armenia has such Christian symbolism become part of the alphabet itself.”

Also worth mentioning is the seventh letter of the Armenian alphabet, `长途 (eh), which by itself means “he is”. In his commentary on Dionysios Thrax, Grigor Magistros attributes to the open sound of this letter to the essence of God’s eternal being, and considers its position as the seventh letter a mystical indication for its divine nature. This view is not surprising since, according to the well known story, God himself dictated the order of the Armenian alphabet to the prophet Mesrop Mashtots.

To conclude, the Canon Tables of the Armenian tradition are rich in visual symbolism in both the pictorial decorations but also in the shapes of the script of the Armenian alphabet. The elaborate ornamentation surrounding the Canon Tables are openly sensual and function as aids for the focus and purification of the viewer’s soul in preparation for the greater vision of the Gospel texts. The lush and often dynamic symbolism in Armenian and more generally Eastern Christian art are not didactic tools but have a psychological mystical role not found in the Western tradition. They are layered complex artistic expressions, which as explained by Nerses Shnorhali, are for the spiritual ascension of the educated elite and not the simple folk. In seeking to engage all of the human senses,


26 Ibid.
the Eastern artwork of the Armenian Canon Tables represent a truly a synesthetic experience which characterizes their unique psychological role: preparing the soul of the viewer to read the Holy Gospels by focusing their sight on ‘khorhourt’, the ‘mystery profound’ though rich paradisiacal symbolism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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