

NONNUS OF NISIBIS, COMMENTARY
ON THE GOSPEL OF SAINT JOHN



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NONNUS OF NISIBIS, COMMENTARY
ON THE GOSPEL OF SAINT JOHN

Translation of the Armenian Text
with Introduction and Commentary

by

Robert W. Thomson



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To Judith

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PREFACE

The Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John by Nonnus, which dates to the mid-ninth century, is of interest for a variety of reasons: linguistic, historical, and theological. It is important linguistically because it is the first text translated from Arabic into Armenian; and it is notable as a Christian work, whereas the majority of texts translated from Arabic in later times were of a technical or secular origin.¹ It is a valuable historical source for relations of its original sponsor with the Muslim world of the ninth century. As a theological document it defends the miaphysite² position of the Armenian church in union with the western Syrian church against the Chalcedonian position of the Greek Byzantine church, and it exerted much influence on later Armenian commentators of the Bible.

Nonnus spent three years examining codices in Syrian monasteries in the course of preparing this commentary. Although he does not name any of his sources, it is possible to place his exegesis in the context of trends in Eastern Christian biblical exposition, primarily the Syrian tradition. In the translation that follows I have therefore placed emphasis on parallels in Syriac commentaries on the Gospel of John, noting also earlier Greek writers whose works were influential in Syria. In Armenian only the *Commentary on the Four Evangelists* by Step'annos of Siunik' predates this text, but that bears little relation to Nonnus's concerns.

The following translation, with my own commentary to the Armenian text, has been several years in the making. Over that time I have greatly profited from discussions with colleagues in the Oriental Institute and from comments to brief presentations at Armenian conferences. To all concerned I offer sincere thanks, especially to Sebastian Brock and David Taylor. I am also

1. The Arabic original, alas lost, is also of importance as an early example of Christian writing in that language. Nonnus's other writings were in Syriac.

2. The term "miaphysite" has recently become more popular than "monophysite," since it reflects more accurately Cyril of Alexandria's doctrine: "One nature [*mia physis*] of the Word incarnate."

grateful to the Director of the Matenadaran in Erevan for providing a disk with the text of their manuscript 5551.

The Oriental Institute
Robert W. Thomson
Oxford



TRANSCRIPTION

ARMENIAN

ա	բ	գ	դ	ե	զ	է	ը	թ	լ	լ	խ	ծ	կ	հ	ա	ղ	
a	b	g	d	e	z	ē	ě	t'	ž	i	l	x	c	k	h	j	ł
ֆ	ւ	յ	ն	օ	ւ	ղ	ս	ւ	վ	ա	բ	գ	ւ	փ	ֆ		
č	m	y	n	š	o	č'	p	ǰ	ř	s	v	t	r	c'	w	p'	k'

GREEK

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν
a	b	g	d	e	z	ē	th	i	k	l	m	n
ξ	ο	π	ρ	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω	ου	
x	o	p	r	s	t	y	ph	ch	ps	ō	ou	

SYRIAC

ܐ	ܒ	ܓ	ܕ	ܗ	ܘ	ܙ	ܠ	ܡ	ܢ	ܣ	ܥ	ܦ	ܩ	ܪ	ܫ	ܬ
'	b	g	d	h	w	z	h	t	y	k						
l	m	n	s	'	p	š	q	r	š	t						

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In the Islamic world, from the ninth to the thirteenth century, there was a burgeoning of interest in the Bible. It was in Islamic Tiberias that the first critical edition of the Hebrew Bible—the Masoretic text—was produced, yet this is only one of many achievements during this extraordinarily productive era. In Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain Jews, Christians, and Samaritans produced multiple, often competing translations of the Bible into Arabic. They also penned hundreds of linear, verse-by-verse, word-by-word commentaries, written from multiple perspectives and representing different traditions. This focus on the Bible generated a large cognate literature as well, including lexicons and grammars, legal monographs and codes, systematic works of theology and philosophy, polemical tracts and heresiographies. Others also showed increasing awareness of and interest in the Bible, as exemplified by the Islamic “Legends of the Prophets” anthologies produced during the period and the appeal to biblical verses in Muslim and Zoroastrian anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics.

Despite growing awareness of the “Eastern” traditions of biblical studies, scholarship on medieval exegesis continues to be dominated by Western Europe: the Latin tradition, especially the school of St. Victor forward, and the Hebrew tradition, especially Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Nachmanides, and David Kimchi. These commentators have been written about again and again, their texts have been edited and translated, and a high degree of synthesis has been achieved. The Arabic tradition, in contrast, remains woefully understudied. Hundreds of works remain in manuscript, most of the texts that have been published have not been translated into European languages, and the few attempts at synthesis struggle to present conclusions based on 10 percent, at most, of the data.

To help create a foundation for the study of this, one of the last frontiers in the history of biblical studies, the Writings from the Islamic World (WIW) series makes available original sources from the Arabic tradition, including translations of the Bible and commentaries, as well as texts, translations, and studies related to the cognate literature. Texts in Arabic will be the primary

focus, but works produced in other “Islamicate” languages will be included as well, especially Armenian, Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac. Volumes, which typically include an introduction, the original text with English translation, explanatory or textual notes, bibliography, and indices, are ideal for both scholars and students of religion, culture, and the history of exegesis during the medieval period.

We are proud to launch the WIW series with Robert Thomon’s translation of Nonnus of Nisibis’s *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*. Our sincere thanks go not only to Professor Thomson for proposing that SBL Press publish this important work but also to David Konstan and Johan Thom (former editors of the Writings from the Greco-Roman World series), who expertly managed the review and acceptance of the proposal and manuscript even before the WIW series existed.

James T. Robinson
The University of Chicago



ABBREVIATIONS

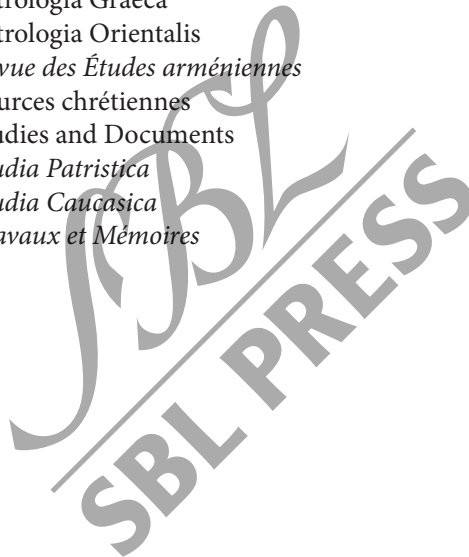
PRIMARY SOURCES

<i>Comm. Diat.</i>	<i>Commentary on the Diatessaron</i> (attributed to Ephrem)
<i>Comm. Jo.</i>	Cyril of Alexandria, <i>Commentary on the Gospel of John</i> ; Origen, <i>Commentary on John</i>
<i>Gospels</i>	Dionysius bar Salibi, <i>Commentary on the Gospels</i>
<i>Hex.</i>	Basil of Caesarea, <i>Hexaemeron</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</i>
<i>Hom. Jo.</i>	John Chrysostom, <i>Homilies on John</i>
<i>Jer</i>	Jerusalem
<i>John</i>	Dionysius bar Salibi, <i>Commentary on John</i>
<i>M</i>	Mat 5551
<i>Mat</i>	Matenadaran
<i>N</i>	Ven 1630
<i>Prologue</i>	Philoxenus of Mabbug, <i>Commentary on the Johannine Prologue</i>
<i>Teaching</i>	<i>The Teaching of Saint Gregory</i> (= Agat'angelos, <i>History</i> 259–715)
<i>V</i>	Unspecified Venice manuscript
<i>Ven</i>	Venice
<i>Z</i>	Armenian Bible. <i>Astuacašunč' Matean hin ew nor Ktakaranac'</i> . Edited by Y. Zōhrapan. 1805. Reprint, Delmar, N.Y., 1984

SECONDARY SOURCES

<i>AVANT</i>	Treasures of the Armenian Christian Tradition, St. Nersess Armenian Seminary
<i>CPG</i>	<i>Clavis Patrum Graecorum</i> . Edited by M. Geerard. 5 vols. Turnhout, 1974–87
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>

DOS	Dumbarton Oaks Studies
DSALL	Dutch Studies in Armenian Language and Literature
ECTT	Eastern Christian Texts in Translation
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller
HA	<i>Handes Amsorya</i>
HATS	Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies
HUAS	Hebrew University Armenian Series
JCSSS	<i>Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCE	Library of the Christian East
LOS	London Oriental Series
Mus	<i>Le Muséon: Revue d'études orientales</i>
NBHL	<i>Nor Bargirk' Haykazean Lezui</i> . Edited by G. Awetikean, X. Siwrmélean, and M. Awgerean. 2 vols. 1836–37. Reprint, Erevan, 1979–81
NKGM	Nor Ktakarani Grkëri Meknut'yunner
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
ODCC	<i>Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> . Edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone. 3d rev. ed. Oxford, 2005
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
OrChr	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
ParOr	<i>Parole de l'Orient</i>
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
REArm	<i>Revue des Études arméniennes</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SD	Studies and Documents
SP	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
StCauc	<i>Studia Caucasica</i>
TM	<i>Travaux et Mémoires</i>



INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By the year 800 the church in Armenia had long since broken communion with the Greek Byzantine church, primarily over the nature of Christ as defined by the Council of Chalcedon (“one person in two natures, human and divine”), and had forged its own independent identity in matters liturgical, doctrinal, canonical, and historiographical. Although the Council of Chalcedon—the fourth of the councils called ecumenical since they involved the whole empire, the *oikoumenē*—had been held back in 451, the Eastern Christian world remained in turmoil over its christological definition for more than two centuries thereafter. In Armenia the process of disentanglement from the Byzantine church in favor of the position of Cyril of Alexandria (“one nature of the Word incarnate”) had not been straightforward. Not only were Armenians themselves divided on many of the issues, the Byzantines had wavered in the intensity of their desire to ensure theological unity in the areas formerly part of the Eastern Roman Empire. The last attempt to impose that unity by force, in the reign of Justinian II, had not been successful, and under the energetic leadership of Catholicos (Patriarch) John of Ojun, who presided over two councils (in 719 and 726, at Dvin and Manazkert), the Armenians had created their own, more or less unified, liturgical and doctrinal positions. John had also consolidated the Armenian tradition of canon law, based on the collection of Armenian councils and translations of early Greek ones. Furthermore, later in the eighth century the notion of Armenia as a coherent entity with its individual history stretching back to the most remote times had been successfully fashioned by Movsēs Xorenac'i in his *History of Armenia*. Even though the country was now firmly under Muslim control, against the impositions of which the Armenian princes not infrequently rebelled, Armenian cultural activity had not been totally suppressed and was to revive in the ninth century.¹

1. For the break with Byzantium, see Nina Garsoian's epoch-making *L'église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient* (1999); for the development of Armenian theological and

Nonetheless, those of the Chalcedonian persuasion had not given up hope of bringing the Armenians into their fold. The events that brought Nonnus to Armenia from Nisibis and sparked the commission to write a commentary on the Gospel of John derive ultimately from the missionary interests in this regard of the rather obscure patriarch of Jerusalem, Thomas (807–21), and of the well-known polemicist Theodore Abū Qurrah (ca. 750–ca. 830). At some point between 811 and 813 Theodore, who had already gained fame as an apologist for the Chalcedonian cause and was one of the earliest Christian writers in Arabic,² was asked by Thomas to write an explanation of the Chalcedonian faith for the Armenian church. This was translated into Greek by the Syncellos of the Jerusalem patriarchate, Michael, who delivered it in Armenia when en route to Constantinople, in 813.³ This *Epistle to the Armenians* does not actually mention the Armenians at all, nor is it directed specifically against Armenian ideas. Rather, it is a generic defense of Chalcedon, or perhaps part of a more comprehensive work, written before a copy was sent to Armenia.⁴

The *Epistle* was delivered to the prince of Taron, Ašot Bagratuni (775–826),⁵ and in response Ašot invited Theodore Abū Qurrah to his court. In order to arrange a debate on the matter, Ašot also asked Abū Ra'ita to come and represent the miaphysite position. The latter had gained fame as an apologist writing in Syriac and Arabic.⁶ Abū Ra'ita, however, did not come in person but sent the young deacon Nonnus of Nisibis with a brief treatise Abū Ra'ita had written to defend the miaphysite cause.⁷ The debate was held before Ašot and his nobles in 817, and according to all later Armenian accounts

liturgical individuality, see Garsoian 2012. Both books contain very full bibliographies. The date of the *History* by the unknown Movses remains controversial; see the introduction in Thomson's revised translation, and Garsoian 2003–4.

2. For Theodore Abū Qurrah's use of Qur'anic language in his writing, see Swanson 2007 (esp. 117–23, "The Texts and the Islamic Environment").

3. The original Arabic is lost, but the Greek text survives; see PG 97:1504–21, translation in Lamoreaux 2005 (83–95). For Theodore Abū Qurrah, see also Griffith 2008 (esp. 60–63, for his debates with Muslims).

4. This treatise emphasizes that Christ is a single hypostasis: being both God and man, he has two natures, divine and human. The two natures are joined after the incarnation. Christ thus possesses two properties, two energies, and two wills.

5. Ašot, known as *Mšaker*, "carnivorous," held the position of "prince of princes" from 806; see the genealogical table in Toumanoff 1990 (113). For a brief sketch of Armenia at this period, see Mahé and Mahé 2012 (ch. 4, "Caliphate (634–884)"); more detail in Ter-Ghewondyan 1976; Laurent 1980; Hovannisian 1997.

6. On Abū Ra'ita, see Griffith 1980. For his role in sending Nonnus to Armenia, see Griffith 2001 (esp. 49–53).

7. For this treatise, "Refutation of the Melchites concerning the Union," see Graf 1951, 65–72 of the Arabic text.

Nonnus prevailed.⁸ Theodore was worsted and had to leave Armenia. From the theological point of view, therefore, the miaphysite position in Armenia was strengthened. This is neatly expressed by the thirteenth-century historian Vardan Arewel'ci: "The deacon Nanay came and disputed with Abu Qurra, defeating him by the power of the Holy Spirit. So the prince expelled him, and was confirmed even more in the faith of Saint Gregory."⁹ As often happened, the later position of the Armenian church was defined as the faith of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.¹⁰

Following this debate, Nonnus was commissioned by Ašot's son Bagrat to prepare a commentary on the Gospel of John. The debate had no doubt been conducted in Arabic,¹¹ and when Nonnus presented his commentary to Bagrat some years later, it too was in Arabic. On the other hand, the sources used by Nonnus for his commentary were in Syriac.¹²

The Armenian translator of Nonnus's *Commentary* has left a preface describing the circumstances of the composition of the commentary and its translation.¹³ He begins with the flourishes typical of Armenian authors as he describes his own inadequacy when faced by the commission of his noble patron, Smbat Bagratuni. Smbat, Bagrat's brother, had ordered a translation of the Arabic text into Armenian, though it was not completed for many years.¹⁴ Like the earlier historian Agat'angelos, the translator refers to those who travel to the ends of India on a quest for the glittering topaz, those who dive for pearls, and those who seek to acquire the silk of royal purple that is produced by "nauseating worms" (*ordunk' zazra'cealk'*). But he could not escape such a

8. This Nonnus, known in Armenian as Nanay the Syrian, is not to be confused with the fifth-century poet Nonnus of Panopolis in Egypt, who composed a paraphrase of the Gospel of John in Greek. (Baronian and Conybeare [1918] made this mistake in describing MS 74.) The references to "Nonnus" in Metzger 1975 are to the fifth-century writer's text of the Gospel of John, not to Nonnus of Nisibis's *Commentary*.

9. Vardan Arewel'ci, *Historical Compilation*, 78. He is the first historian to mention this debate.

10. For this trend to attribute later developments in the Armenian church to Gregory himself, see the introduction to Thomson 2010.

11. Although the copy of Theodore Abū Qurrah's treatise had been translated into Greek, Theodore himself spoke Arabic. Abū Ra'ita's contribution was in Arabic, and Nonnus knew Arabic, though most of his own writings are in Syriac. Syriac was a language known to ecclesiastical circles in Armenia but not used at court. For knowledge of Arabic in Armenia at this time, see Thomson, "Arabic in Armenia" (forthcoming).

12. The Arabic commentary is, of course, important as evidence for the adoption of Arabic by the Christians of Muslim Syria and Mesopotamia.

13. This is translated in full below, preceding the text of the commentary.

14. See further below, xxi.

sublime request. After four pages of similar rhetoric he comes to the point. A learned man by the name of Nanay (i.e., Nonnus), competent in Syrian literature and orthodox in faith, defeated a certain heretical philosopher and had him expelled from Armenia. This unnamed heretic, that is, Theodore Abū Qurrah, taught perversely by dividing into two the inseparable unity of Christ after the indivisible and unconfused unity. Nonnus reaffirmed the orthodox position: to confess one from two persons, the divine attributes by nature, but the lesser human characteristics by divine acceptance. And indeed, the *Commentary* is devoted to that position, a detailed exposition of Cyril of Alexandria's classic phrase: *mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkōmenē*.

According to the preface, at some unstated time after the debate Nonnus was solicited by Bagrat Bagratuni to produce a commentary on the Gospel of John.¹⁵ After rigorous fasts and prayers Nonnus undertook the task. He spent three years traveling through the deserts of Mesopotamia and composed a commentary, summarizing from many books, "one by one methodically, translating from the Syrian tongue into the Hagarene language." Alas, we are given no clues as to the identity of these Syriac sources, though there are several references to "other exemplars."¹⁶ Bagrat was later captured by the Hagarenes (i.e., the Muslims). The author of the preface notes that when in prison, he sadly fell away from the divine faith and plunged into the pit of irreparable destruction, though the author also claims that in the depth of his heart Bagrat kept firm the profession of the true faith. By some chance, he continues, the book came into the hands of Smbat Bagratuni, Bagrat's brother, and it was Smbat who commanded it to be translated from Arabic. Meanwhile Nonnus himself had also been imprisoned, but he never abjured his faith, despite various temptations.¹⁷ "After this had so happened," for the writer gives no dates, the book came to the princess of Siwnik, Marem Bagratuni, who repeated the command to have it translated. And if there are any blemishes in the ensuing result, the author of the preface begs his readers not to be critical. Finally, he describes the difference between John's Gospel and the three other (canonical) Gospels, with the circumstances of its original composition by the evangelist.

15. The spelling of Bagrat's name varies in the sources, often appearing as Bagarat. Bagrat is the usual form of this common name. For the Bagratuni family in the earlier period, see Garsoïan 1989 (362–63); and for stemmata of the various branches, see Toumanoff 1990.

16. See below, xxviii–xxix, for the references and their meaning.

17. For the imprisonment of Nonnus, see Mariès 1920–21 (276), and further below, xliii.

A few details may be added from other sources. Bagrat was arrested in 851 and imprisoned by the Muslim caliph in Samarra, where he apostatized.¹⁸ T'ovma Arcruni notes: "The memory of his going astray ... remains from generation to generation for ever."¹⁹ Bagrat died the next year in captivity.

The preface to the translation indicates that the Arabic text of the *Commentary on John* came into the hands of Bagrat's brother, Smbat, who commanded a translation to be made into Armenian; but in 855 he too was imprisoned in Samarra before that could be completed. Smbat died in prison without abjuring his faith, for which he gained the epithet of "the confessor." The book then came down to Smbat's granddaughter Marem, the wife of Vasak prince of Siunik'. It was she who finally had the translation completed, probably in the 880s.²⁰ The original Arabic text was not preserved, so we know the *Commentary* only in its Armenian form.

The translator ends the first half of the work with a colophon at the end of chapter 10. The wording seems to imply that he has finished his task; but it cannot mean that this was all that Smbat's command produced, since the translator names Smbat and Marem of Siwnik' together: "who commanded [pl.] this holy book to be translated." The second half of the commentary does not contain any personal comment by the original translator. So it remains unclear whether Smbat's original command for a translation resulted in a partial rendering, a preliminary draft, or nothing tangible.

MANUSCRIPTS AND PRINTED EDITION

One edition of Nonnus's *Commentary* exists, printed in 1920 in Venice. Its editor, Fr. K'erobē Ć'rakēan, used manuscript Ven 1630 (of the Mekhitarist collection at San Lazzaro in Venice), which was written in 1155 of our era in Amida (modern Diyarbekir).²¹ He noted some variants in one modern manu-

18. See Garsoïan in Hovannisian 1997 (1:140).

19. The translator's preface to the Armenian text of the *Commentary* claims that Bagrat kept firm the profession of the true faith in the depth of his heart. According to T'ovma Arcruni, *History of the Arcruniks*, 162, Bagrat himself had said that apostasy because of danger of suffering does no harm if one secretly keeps in one's heart the confession of faith. The phrasing of the passages in the translator's preface and in the historian is quite similar.

20. The exact date is not known, but Marem's father, Ašot, is called "prince of princes" in the translator's preface. Ašot acquired that title circa 862 but by 884 was officially "king." (He died in 890.) Ter-Ľevondyan (1976, 235) indicates that he was called king in inscriptions as early as 874. Step'annos Orbelean, *History of Siwnik'*, ch. 37, gives information about Mariam's charitable work and her role in the foundation of the monastery of Sewan (for which see Pogossian 2012), but he does not mention Nonnus.

21. Ven 1630 contains only Nonnus's *Commentary*. It was written by Kirakos; for a full

script (which he fails to identify); there are indeed several nineteenth-century copies of the text in Venice.

The Matenadaran in Erevan kindly provided a disk of another manuscript, Mat 5551, also dated to 1155 but written in the monastery of Kamrjaġor (south of Kars).²² There are many differences between this manuscript and the printed edition in minor details, but the Matenadaran manuscript has generally a superior text, especially where Venice 1630 has omitted phrases.²³ These are the oldest dated manuscripts of the *Commentary*, though Mat 4134 also dates to the twelfth century, according to the catalogue. There are many other manuscripts dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries: at least twenty-seven in the Matenadaran, twelve in Jerusalem, and other examples in Paris, Vienna, Venice, and Oxford. The following list indicates the dates of these manuscripts and their places of writing, excluding those manuscripts that contain only extracts:

Date	Manuscript (Provenance)*
1155	Ven 1630 (Amida; = N); Mat 5551 (Kamrjaġor; = M)
12th century	Mat 4134 (np)
1228	Jer 1295 (Skewra)
1286	Mat 10480 (not in catalogue)
13th century	Mat 5611 (np); Mat 6903 (np); Jer 1046 (np)
1306	Mat 2520 (Erzinjan? [commissioned by Yovhannēs Erznac'i])
1322	Mat 1275 (Glajor?)
1347	Mat 1138 (Sis)
1363	Mat 2611 (Crimea)
1398	Jer 73 (Jerusalem)

description see Čemčemeian 1998 (vol. 8, col. 509–14). Č'raġean (p. *It'* [39]) notes some of the vagaries of its spelling.

22. Here I acknowledge the help of its director, Hratch Tamrazyan. Mat 5551 also contains the *Commentary on the Four Evangelists* by Step'annos of Siunik'; for a description, see Eganyan et al. 1970 (vol. 2, col. 131).

23. Mat 5551 is written in a variety of hands, and there are numerous colophons. Its history is clearly quite complicated and needs further elucidation.

14th century	Mat 1244 (np); Mat 1426 (np)
1414	Mat 1391 (np)
16th century	Mat 1350 (np)
1625	Mat 1278 (Xotanan [Siwnik'], Ĕjmiacin)
1634	Jer 633 (Jerusalem?)
1637	Jer 1113 (np)
1656	Mat 1449 (np)
1666	Mat 1390 (Nor Julfa)
17th century	Mat 4359 (np); Mat 1349 (np); Vienna 611 (np); Oxford 74
1725	Jer 675 (Jerusalem)
1729	Jer 68 (Caesarea)
1736	Jer 3196 (Jerusalem)
1737	Jer 154 (Jerusalem)
1786	Mat 1880 (Jerusalem)
18th century	Mat 6472 (np); Jer 3508
1809	Mat 2689 (Constantinople)
1822	Mat 7581 (Constantinople? [written by P. Polsec'i])
1825	Ven 1631, a copy of Ven 1630 (Venice)
1848	Mat 1348 (Samat'ia [Constantinople])
19th century	Ven 1632 (np); Ven 1633 (np); Mat 5705 (np); 7551 (np)
unclear	Jer 1759 (np; in <i>bologir</i>)
* np = provenance unknown	

Many of the surviving manuscripts have no indication of their place of writing (at least, from descriptions in printed catalogues). Nonetheless, from the evidence it is clear that the Armenian version of this commentary by Nonnus had a wide circulation in historic Armenia. The oldest dated manuscripts, Mat 5551 and Ven 1630, were written at opposite ends of the country:

Mat 5551 in the northwest near Kars, Ven 1630 in the south on the Tigris at Amida. In 1228 a copy was made in Cilicia, at the monastery of Skewra, and in 1347 another copy at Sis, the capital of Armenian Cilicia. Far to the north in Crimea a copy was made in 1363. In central Armenia copies were made at Glajor (perhaps) in 1322, Ayrivank' (perhaps) in 1414, and Siwnik' and Ējmiacin in 1625. To the east a copy was written at Nor Julfa near Isfahan in 1666. To the west, in Anatolia copies were made at Erzinjan (perhaps) in 1306, and Caesarea in 1729. Numerous copies were made in Jerusalem: 1398, 1634, and four in the eighteenth century. In Constantinople copies were made only in the nineteenth century. A more detailed examination of the manuscripts than is presently available would enhance this picture. But of all later Armenian commentaries on John, only that by the late fourteenth-century Mattēos Jułayec'i circulated in a comparable number of copies.²⁴

The translation of Nonnus below is based on the printed edition, which was made from Ven 1630 (= N), and is supplemented by the text in Mat 5551 (= M). The significant variants are indicated in the notes at the bottom of each page.²⁵ Wherever the editor Č'raķean notes a variant taken from his unspecified recent Venice manuscript, this is marked by "V." Sometimes this modern text is in agreement with M. Further corroboration of preferred readings comes from the numerous citations of this commentary in the *Commentary on John* by Grigor Tat'ewac'i, which is dated to 1409.²⁶

Nonnus's *Commentary* is quite long, running to 445 printed pages in N and 222 folios in M (which lacks the preface and the text up to John 1:3).²⁷ Nonnus divides the Gospel text into longer or shorter sections. His commentary to each successive lemma also varies in length. At the end of chapter 10 there is a colophon by the translator recalling the sponsors Smbat Bagratuni and Marem princess of Siwnik', and chapter 11 begins with the title "Of the Same Holy Nanay." This indicates that the original work was divided into two sections. The printed edition provides four section breaks in the first four chapters.²⁸ Č'raķean suggests that these represent sections for public reading

24. See the descriptions in Petrosyan and Ter-Stepanyan 2002 (93–97).

25. By "significant" I mean any variants that would require a change in the English translation. Therefore variants of spelling of the same Armenian word are not noted.

26. Grigor begins this commentary by giving a résumé of the circumstances that led to the composition of Nonnus's text and explaining various terms.

27. Note that Č'raķean gives the page numbers of his manuscript (Ven 1630) in the margins to the text; these are the page numbers to which he refers in his introduction, not the page numbers of the book marked in the top corner.

28. At John 1:1; 1:18; 2:12; and 4:1.

or a sermon. They are not found in M and do not continue after the fourth, and thus they appear to be secondary divisions.

Since the Arabic text of the commentary has disappeared, we cannot check what changes, abbreviations, or expansions were introduced by the translator. The text of the commentary is expanded at various points by exhortations to the readers, and Č'rak'ean found parallels in some of these with other Armenian texts.²⁹ So it seems reasonable to suppose that they did not form part of Nonnus's original work but were added by the Armenian translator (or by a copyist before the manuscript tradition began to diverge). The passages in question all end with "Amen," but only some are marked as *yodorak*, "exhortation," by the editor of N or in M. These additions occur at the commentary on the following passages from John:

- 1:17: Exhortation to virtue.
- 2:11: A passage on Christ as the mystical groom at the end of the account of the wedding at Cana.
- 3:15: Following the reference to eternal life, an exhortation to avoid sin and perform good deeds in order to attain the supernal Jerusalem. Here M has *yor* (*yodorak*) in the margin, but N does not mark the passage.
- 6:59: A passage on the Eucharist as the food of life.
- 10:40–42: An exhortation to virtue. The editor of N marks this section as *yodorak*, but the scribe of M has no such indication. This is followed by a lengthy passage of praise for the church of Armenia, ending with a colophon by the translator and a reference to the patrons of the translation, Smbat Bagratuni and Marem princess of Siwnik'. Here ends Book I of the commentary.³⁰
- 11:45–46: Praise for the resurrection of Lazarus, followed by exhortation to the readers. The editor of N marks the section as *yodorak*, but not the scribe of M.
- 12:50: Further exhortation to virtue. This is marked *yodorak* by the editor of N; the scribe of M has *Yk* (*yodorak*) in the margin.
- 19:37: Disparagement of the Old Israel and praise for the New.
- 21:25: Praise of the resurrection. This is marked as *yodorak* by the editor of N, but not by the scribe of M.

29. See notes to the commentary, ad loc.

30. After the "Exhortation," before the passage on the Armenian church, the scribe of M notes: "This book ends." So the division into two books dates at least to the twelfth century.

TRANSLATION AND THE ARMENIAN BIBLICAL TEXT

As the original Arabic is lost, the accuracy of the translator in rendering Nonnus's biblical text in the lemmata cannot be judged. The biblical passages in the two oldest dated manuscripts are often in disagreement with the standard Armenian biblical text, that is, with the text edited by Zōhrapean (= Z). That is not surprising, since the latter is based on the tradition of Armenian Cilicia, more than four hundred years after the commentary was translated.³¹ In the notes to the lemmata in the translation below, the differences with Z are indicated; but in the absence of a critical edition of the Armenian Gospel of John, it is impossible to make any general comments about the relationship of the biblical text known to the ninth-century translator of the Arabic commentary with a more widely used ninth-century Armenian Bible.

Only a few verses of John's Gospel are omitted, the most obvious being the pericope of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), which is not found in the Old Syriac or in early Armenian Bibles.³² John 5:4, regarding the angel who stirred the waters, is also missing; the commentary, however, does refer to the angel stirring the waters. Though printed in Z, this verse is not found in many early Armenian manuscripts. The lemma of 1:7b, "that all through him might believe," is omitted, though the commentary ends with a reference to "coming to faith." At 2:15 Nonnus also omits part of the lemma, "and he scattered the coins of the money changers and overthrew the tables," to which the commentary makes no reference. Nonnus does not include the lemma of 10:15b: "and I lay down my life for the sheep"; but the commentary following, to verse 17, picks up the theme. And at 18:8a the lemma omits Jesus's remark "I told you that," which appears in the repetition of the verse in the commentary. On the other hand, at 12:17–18 ("and the people who were with him testified ... that he had performed those miracles"), the lemma may not be part of the original text; it interrupts the commentary to the previous verse, is not mentioned in the commentary, and is omitted in N.

Occasionally there is a minor variant between the lemma and the commentary, as at John 6:40, where "receives" appears in the lemma but "will receive" is found in the commentary. But the most curious discrepancy is that three times a reference to "Pharisees" in the lemma is changed to "Sadducees" in the commentary: at 1:24; 4:1–3; and 11:46.³³

31. See Cox 1984.

32. See note to commentary on John 7:52 for this section as found in other commentaries.

33. See also commentary to John 12:12–13 for a reference to the Sadducees, where Pharisees have just been mentioned.

Nonnus makes only one serious mistake in identifying a biblical quotation. At John 16:25 he notes that John referred to Christ's postresurrection appearances also in the Catholic Epistles. His citation, on the other hand, is a direct quotation of Acts 1:3. Nonnus does not always identify the author quoted, but no other mistakes are made. He refers by name to the four evangelists and to Paul, Moses, Isaiah, and David. John is often called "the evangelist" or "the apostle"; "[Moses's] own history" refers to Genesis (at John 1:3); "Moses . . . prophesied" refers to Deuteronomy (at John 1:21b); "the law" refers to Deuteronomy (at John 3:15), as does "what Moses had said" (at 19:15a); the "book of Genesis" is so named at John 4:25, and "the Old Testament" at 4:26. There is a general reference to the "writings," *grealsn*, of Moses at 5:45.³⁴ "The earlier prophet" or "the prophetic voice" is Isaiah (at John 2:11; 11:9–10); "the prophecies" can refer to the Psalms or to Isaiah.³⁵

More interestingly, in the commentary to Christ calling himself the "good shepherd" at John 10:11, the translator makes a reference to his own work in rendering the commentary from Arabic into Armenian. He discusses the meaning of the Armenian word used to translate "good": *k'aj*. This he says means *bari*, "good," quoting Luke 18:19, where the Armenian biblical text does have *bari*. In the lemma for John 10:14, however, the translator uses *bari*, whereas the standard Armenian text (i.e., Z) repeats *k'aj*. The basic meaning of *k'aj* is "noble, valiant"; in John 10:11 and 14 the Greek is *kalos*; in the Greek of Luke 18:19 the adjective *agathos* is used. In Syriac *ṭb'* is used for both occurrences of "good."

Nonnus occasionally notes alternative readings for his biblical text:

1:28: "We have also found in a copy [*awrinak*] somewhere Bet'abra called Bet'ania." This probably refers to a copy of the Bible, not a commentator. Although the commentators are indeed divided over the topic, the biblical manuscripts also diverge.³⁶ Here the lemma agrees with Z.

11:28: "We have found in some exemplars that the Lord commanded Mary to be summoned." Here the biblical text rather than a commentator seems to be involved, for Nonnus omits the second part of the verse in his lemma: "And she said, 'the teacher has come and summons you.'"³⁷ The phrase is found in Z, however, and in the wider biblical tradition.

34. Since *grealsn* is used, the meaning is not "books," which would be *girsn*.

35. There is one reference to the Holy Spirit prophesying (Ps 77), but it occurs in the "Exhortation" added to chapter 19, not in the commentary of Nonnus.

36. See note to the commentary, ad loc.

37. See note to the commentary, ad loc.

The translator appended to his introduction a brief description of the writing of their Gospels by the four evangelists.³⁸ Nonnus himself makes reference occasionally to the differences between John and the other evangelists. Thus at John 1:35 he states that John omitted what had been said by Matthew, Mark, and Luke concerning the temptation of Christ in the desert. At greater length he explains at 12:16 that John was not concerned to repeat what had been related by the other three evangelists but described what they had omitted, such as the wedding at Cana. Several times Nonnus distinguishes between different accounts of similar, but not necessarily identical, episodes: for example, the nobleman whose son was healed in John 4:46 and Matt 8; Jesus walking on the sea in John 6:18 and Matt 14; Mary anointing the Lord's feet in John 11:2 and in Matt 26 and Mark 14; the words of Jesus on the cross in John 19:30, compared to those in Matt 27 and Luke 23; and Mary coming first to the tomb in John 20:1 and Matt 28.

PARALLEL TEXTS IN SYRIAC AND GREEK

Nonnus spent three years combing Syrian monasteries in Mesopotamia. But neither the translator, in his preface, nor the author, in his text, gives any indication whatsoever as to the specific writers or works that Nonnus perused. In the commentary to the following verses, Nonnus does occasionally refer to another exemplar (*awrinak*), without identification, or to an author without naming him:

- 1:5a: "a certain other holy man," who "describes the various bodily movements of the passions³⁹ within us."
 1:18: "to some this seems not to fit the context."
 1:29: "someone from among the teachers says." This is a reference to a commentator; here John Chrysostom is intended.⁴⁰
 4:46–47: "to some it so seemed that this is the same person as Matthew described, but they did not understand correctly" (i.e., the nobleman whose son was ill in Capernaum).
 5:15–16: "some of the commentators [*ṭargmanič'k*]," regarding the identity of the accounts by Matthew and John of the healing of the blind man.⁴¹

38. Translation below, 6–7.

39. Passions: *kirk'*; see the discussion of terms below, xxxviii.

40. See note to the commentary, ad loc.

41. John Chrysostom also noted various opinions; see note to the commentary, ad loc.

- 6:18–21: “some of the earlier [commentators] thought these [words] were what Matthew related” (i.e., Jesus walking on the sea).
- 7:4–5: “some have said,” regarding the motives for Jesus’s brothers urging him to go up to Jerusalem.
- 9:4–5: “we have found it in some examples,” regarding the interpretation of “while it is daytime.”
- 11:35–37: “we found also in some exemplars,” regarding the interpretation of “Jesus wept.”
- 12:20–21: “it is said somewhere,” that is, by a commentator regarding the Gentiles who went up to the feast.
- 19:17b–18a: “we have found from the tradition of the ancients” (i.e., from apocryphal tales regarding the burial of Adam’s skull at Golgotha). Nonbiblical sources were also used for the story of Christ’s birth in a cave (at John 1:14b).
- 20:17a: “we have found from accurate examples,” regarding Mary’s thoughts concerning the risen Christ.
- 21:12: “we found from examples,” regarding the disciples on seeing Jesus at the Lake of Tiberias.

In the notes to the following translation, parallels in other commentators to these passages have been adduced, but the precise texts to which Nonnus refers often remain unclear. Although Nonnus drew primarily on commentaries of the Syrian tradition, these included translations of Greek patristic writers. The direct origin of a comment in Nonnus is thus sometimes difficult to pin down.

The earliest writer in Syriac to be cited below is Ephrem Syrus (d. 373), a prolific author and composer of commentaries, though he did not write specifically on John.⁴² The *Commentary on the Diatessaron* however, which is of interest for exegesis of John’s Gospel, is from the circle of Ephrem, not the master himself. In any event, one can find in Nonnus a few parallels with that commentary, though it is not quoted directly.

More influential on Nonnus were the extensive *Homilies on John* by John Chrysostom; these were known in Syriac translation from the sixth century, and there are many parallels in the Armenian text of Nonnus’s *Commentary*. Č’rakean gives parallels for three passages: at John 2:15, *xndreli ē...*; 4:6, *tes ew zvestakeloy...*; and 11:43, *naew oč’ ayloy...*⁴³ He also indicates Chrysostom’s

42. Curiously, the OT commentaries in Armenian attributed to him are much later compositions that derive from the tenth or eleventh century; see Mathews 1998, esp. the introduction.

43. See notes to the commentary, ad loc.

references to the “thieves and brigands” of 10:7–8, explained in the same fashion by Nonnus.⁴⁴ In fact, the parallels are far more extensive than that and can be found throughout the commentary, as indicated in the notes to the following translation. But since many other commentators also relied on Chrysostom, parallels between Chrysostom and Nonnus do not necessarily always derive from a *direct* reading by the latter of the former’s *Homilies on John*. A passage from Chrysostom’s *Hom. Jo.* 69, correctly ascribed to *Yova Oskeber*, has been added by a later scribe to the commentary following 11:42; it appears in M and V but not N.

Č’rakean notes two parallels with Severian of Gabbala, an opponent of John Chrysostom, at John 11:33 (*isk harcàneln...*) and 11:41 (*ew zays aselov...*); both are passages from the story of Lazarus.⁴⁵ Many of Severian’s homilies are in fact preserved under the name of Chrysostom. But he was little known in Syriac tradition.⁴⁶ If Nonnus did in fact read Severian—for other commentators also give similar interpretations to these passages—it is unclear whether he read him in Greek or in Syriac translation. In addition there are also numerous parallels with Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, which was known in Syriac, though only fragments survive.⁴⁷

After the fifth century the exegetical tradition begins to diverge between authors of the Western Syrian tradition and those from the church of the East, who were loyal to the school of Antioch. Of the first group, Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) was a popular theologian in Armenia; quotations from his writings appear in the florilegia. Only fragments of his commentaries on the Gospels survive, but we do possess an extensive treatise on the prologue to the Gospel of John. This is a defense of a theological viewpoint shared by Nonnus⁴⁸ but is of little relevance for the general exposition of the whole Gospel. By far the most important Syriac commentary that has parallels in Nonnus is the one by Moše bar Kepha, who was much indebted

44. For other commentators with the same interpretation, see note to the commentary, ad loc.

45. The passages are from *Homily 2* (Awgerean, 28, 34). This section of the homily (entitled *De incarnatione* in the Latin version, but without title in the Armenian text) deals with the resurrection of Lazarus. Other commentators give similar explanations; see the commentary below. This homily is by Severian, not Eusebius of Emesa; see Lehmann 1975 (171).

46. See references in CPG; Ortiz de Urbina 1965 (248): “inedita.”

47. The parallels with Cyril are signaled in the notes to the commentary.

48. Defined by de Halleux, in his edition of Philoxenus’s *Prologue*, as “un traité de polémique christologique” (p. xv). The fragments on John quoted by de Halleux (1963, 150–62) bear little relation to the exposition of Nonnus.

to John Chrysostom. Moše lived in the ninth century and died in 903, so he was obviously not a direct source for Nonnus. Nonetheless, he represents a tradition on which Nonnus drew, and parallels between his commentary and that of Nonnus abound.

Even later are the writings of Dionysius bar Salibi, known for his anti-Armenian attitude. He died in 1171, but two of his works are of importance for us: his general *Commentary on the Gospels*, and a separate work specifically on John. Parallels between these and Nonnus are frequent. Another reason for the importance of Dionysius is that he was familiar with Western Syriac as well as Eastern Syriac traditions, notably the *Commentary on John* by the early fifth-century Theodore of Mopsuestia, which was available in Syriac, and the *Commentary on the Gospels* by Išodad of Merv (d. c. 850) for the Eastern tradition. Parallels with the Syriac texts of Theodore and Išodad are also indicated in the notes to the following translation.

In the commentary by Nonnus one occasionally finds statements with no parallel in the Syriac tradition. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless someone is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nonnus adds a description of our first, natural birth, the coming into being of a child from the elements of earth, water, air, and fire, with flesh and bones, sinews and tendons and ligaments, the stretching out of the skin, the hair, nails, membranes and fat, the five physical senses, and the four characteristics defined by the medical art, namely, phlegm, blood, and the two kinds of bile. These details of the human body are spelled out by John Chrysostom but are without parallel in the Syrian commentators.

On other occasions Nonnus agrees with all commentators, as in the explanation of John 8:33. The Jews said, "We are the seed of Abraham and have not ever been in servitude to anyone." Nonnus states: "How were they never in servitude to anyone, when they were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt for so long; after that they were kept captive in servitude in Babylon; and then to the Romans as well?" This is the line taken by everyone, with minor variations. John Chrysostom, Moše bar Kepha, Dionysius bar Salibi, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Išodad, and, in Armenian, Tat'ewac'i all refer to Egyptians, Babylonians, and Romans, with some offering more detail than others. Step'annos of Siunik's *Commentary on the Four Evangelists* cites only a minority of the verses in John, and this passage is not among them.

On the other hand, there are explanations that do not appear earlier than Nonnus, or at least, the origin of which I have not traced. For example, in John 9 Jesus cures a man blind from birth. Nonnus says that this man was not just deprived of sight, but the places where his eyes should be were flat with his cheeks, destitute of all formed vessels. A similar description of the blind man

is found in the later Dionysius bar Salibi, and Tat'ewac'i echoes Nonnus, but it seems not to appear earlier.⁴⁹

Nonnus did not draw on earlier Armenian tradition, but it is interesting to note some differences of interpretation between his work and the eighth-century *Commentary on the Four Evangelists* by Step'annos of Siwnik'. The earliest Armenian attempts at biblical commentary are obscure, and controversy surrounds the dating of what survives from before Step'annos.⁵⁰ Before becoming the metropolitan of Siwnik', in the second decade of the eighth century Step'annos had spent several years in Constantinople translating Greek patristic works, notably the corpus of writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite.⁵¹ His own *Commentary on the Four Evangelists* does not treat the Gospels in their entirety, or equally.⁵² Therefore a full comparison with Nonnus is not possible. But it may be interesting to note the following interpretations by Step'annos of passages in John, interpretations that do not occur in the Syrian commentators to the same passages:

- 1:17: Christ's two shoes represent the incarnation and the descent to hell.
- 2:1–11: The groom and the bride at the wedding represent the Mosaic law and the soul, respectively, and the water and wine represent the teaching of the Mosaic law and the superior teaching (of Christ) "which makes souls rejoice."
- 2:14: The oxen, sheep, doves, and money changers in the temple represent various categories of people: those who only think of earthly things; those who pretend to have gentleness but do not; those who lightly-mindedly turn from one doctrine to another; and those who are not pure in heart.
- 9:2: Step'annos refers to philosophers outside the church who explain blindness and other blemishes, such as ill health, as the result of souls sinning before their incarnations in bodies.

49. See Nonnus, commentary to John 9:1.

50. For the earliest commentaries in Armenian and the activity of Step'annos, see Thomson 2006.

51. See the introduction to the Armenian text in Thomson 1987.

52. Of the 142 pages in the recent edition, the first 95 are devoted to Matthew. "The Gospel according to Mark," says Step'annos (1994, 111), "differs in no way from Matthew." The only passage he quotes is Mark 14:51–52, where he identifies the youth who fled naked with Mark himself. The Gospel of Luke takes up the next 22 pages, and another 23 cover the Gospel of John.

After Step'annos, no commentary on John was written in Armenian until the twelfth century. Sargis Kund, whose *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was composed in 1177, quotes numerous earlier writers, including Step'annos, Nanay (Nonnus), and various Armenian homelists, as well as Greek authors and Ephrem; but his work remains unpublished.⁵³ The commentary by Grigor Ta'ewac'i, written in 1409, luckily is available. As already mentioned above, this is valuable as a help to the elucidation of variants in the manuscript tradition of the Armenian rendering of Nonnus.⁵⁴ His comments have thus often been cited in the notes to the translation (though, admittedly, they shed no light on Nonnus's sources).

THEOLOGICAL EMPHASIS AND TECHNICAL VOCABULARY

Nonnus's *Commentary* does not deal exclusively with problems that have to be explained, either literally or allegorically. A good deal of the text is devoted to retelling the Gospel narrative in expanded form, a kind of midrash, in which the reader is sometimes addressed directly in the second person. Nonnus repeats the passage he is explicating, introducing it by saying: "In other words." And sometimes he ends with an exhortation, aimed at inculcating a reaction to the words of the Gospel.⁵⁵ Furthermore, he often refers to Old Testament predictions as an "example," *awrinak*, or "shadow," *stuer*, of the full revelation in Christ. This use of typology is widespread in early Armenian theologians.⁵⁶ Nonnus, however, generally confines his comparisons between the mystery of the Old Testament and the fulfillment in the New to biblical references to the law and the prophets and does not extend such comparisons to the interpretation of physical objects, as was common in Armenian commentators.⁵⁷

It is also noticeable that Nonnus does not share the usual Armenian predilection for number symbolism. He passes over the six vessels, each containing two or three measures, at the marriage of Cana (John 2:5–6), and the five loaves and two fishes at the feeding of the five thousand (6:8–9). His only explanations of numbers are the following: the twelve baskets of remnants

53. See Petrosyan and Ter-Step'anyan 2002 (93) for the MSS.

54. See above, xxiv.

55. Č'raķean (introduction, p. ži' [19]) notes that compared to John Chrysostom, Nonnus rarely emphasizes the moral aspect of his commentary. He repeats earlier comments by Sargisean that Nonnus follows the Antiochene tradition of exegesis, the more literal explanatory style, not the allegorical.

56. See Thomson 2001, 21–23: "God's Eternal Plan and Biblical 'Types.'"

57. See, for example, the list of objects in the index to Thomson 2001 (264, s.v. "Types"). *Awrinak* has other meanings, such as "exemplar (of a book)," as above, xxviii.

(at John 6:12–13) and the twelve hours of the day (at 11:9–10) represent the twelve apostles; the sixth hour at the well of Samaria is parallel to the sixth age, in which faith will come to the world (at 4:26; see v. 6);⁵⁸ also parallel to the sixth age is the sixth day (when Adam departed from paradise and Christ died on the cross) (at 11:55). Nonnus also refers to the “mystery,” *xorhurd*, of the number eight, representing the eighth age.⁵⁹ Various interpretations of the meaning of eight appear in Armenian writers, but the theme of the eighth as the final age is not common.⁶⁰ For Nonnus the 153 fish in the net represent baptism and the Trinity (at 21:13–14).

Nor is Nonnus greatly interested in the etymology of the various places mentioned in the Gospel. He explains *Bedhezda*, the Hebrew name for the *Propatikē* pool, as “descent” or “repose of mercy.” “Descent of mercy” derives from John Chrysostom; the Syrian commentators suggest “house of mercy.”⁶¹ And in the description of the Samaritans he interprets the name either as derived from Mount Sameron or as meaning “guardians,” *pahapank*, correctly translating the stem *šmr* (at 4:21–22; see 3 Kgdms 16:24).

In his exposition Nonnus frequently uses the first person (“we must indicate,” “I shall show you,” “let us note,” “let us examine,” “it seems to me,” “we must explain,” and similar expressions) for his own views, as well as the first-person plural for exhortations (“let us flee from sin,” etc.). He addresses the reader in the second person, often in the imperative, “see,” or as a question, “did you see?”

Nonnus occasionally notes reasons for trusting the accuracy of the evangelist. These too have parallels in other commentators. Thus, he says, it is important to identify the place where events occur (e.g., regarding the place where John the Baptist was active); the same point is made by Cyril of Alexandria and Dionysius bar Salibi.⁶² This is expanded at the beginning of Book II, at John 11:1: “It is customary for those who have undertaken to expound a history of things that occurred earlier both to make clear the event and also to explain the place, so that from both of these the account may be better validated.” This idea is also expressed at the same place in their commentaries by Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria; and the Armenian homilist Mambre in his second *Homily on the Resurrection of*

58. For the theme of six ages of the world, see note to commentary on John 12:50.

59. See commentary to John 20:28, on the second appearance of Christ to the apostles in the upper room after the resurrection.

60. See Thomson 1976, 126, 129.

61. See commentary to John 5:1–3 and notes there.

62. See commentary to John 1:28 and note there.

Lazarus quotes this passage.⁶³ Nonnus also emphasizes personal testimony (e.g., at 3:31b–32: “It is a habit of human nature when [people] wish to make a statement more secure to confirm it with such [words as] *we have seen* and *we bear witness*”). This is confirmed by the closing words of John’s Gospel, where Nonnus emphasizes the eyewitness testimony of the evangelist.

“Allegory” (*arak*, and once *arakabanut’iwn*)⁶⁴ is also important, not merely as a means to expound spiritual matters, but as a way to imprint their meaning on one’s mind. Thus at John 4:35 Nonnus explains: “Allegorical matters are to be seriously investigated, whereas obvious things are not such. Also, when the allegorical becomes clear to the investigator, it remains more securely in his mind than something that passes through his ears once in a literal fashion.”

Nonnus’s prime concern, repeated again and again, is with the incarnation and the nature of Christ. The Fourth Gospel begins: “In the beginning was the Word.” Throughout his commentary Nonnus is concerned with the Word—the incarnate Christ—and his relationship with the Father in the Trinity.

It is not possible to correlate the terminology used in the translation with the original Arabic, since that has not survived; but the Armenian text has close parallels with the terminology of other Armenian theological documents. Here follows a presentation of the main themes and key words, roughly in the order in which they appear in the commentary.

First, Nonnus emphasizes the “uncreatedness” of the Word (*anelut’iwn*, the abstract noun ending in *-ut’iwn* from *-el*, the stem of the verb “to become,” plus the negating prefix *an-*). This noun was not used in the very earliest original texts written in Armenian—Ezriq or the *Teaching of Saint Gregory*, for example—but is often found in translations of the Hellenistic period; in the translation of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite it renders *agenētos*. The base form plus adjectival ending in *-akan* is used for “created things,” *elakank*.⁶⁵ In Nonnus’s commentary to John 1:1 it is contrasted with the “coming into being” of creation, *linelut’iwn*, derived from the verb *linel*, an expression common in the *Teaching*.

63. See notes to Nonnus, commentary on John 11:1, below.

64. *Arak* is very common in Armenian, rendering *parabolē* in the NT; and the adjective *arakawor*, “allegorical,” is found in many authors. But the abstract noun *arakabanut’iwn* (*-banut’iwn* rendering the Greek *-ologia*) is attested only in Nonnus, according to NBHL; see Nonnus, commentary to John 10:7–8.

65. Muradyan 2012, 231; Thomson 1997, 78.

Also stressed is the Word's "eternity," *anskzbnut'iwn*, the abstract noun derived from the adjective *anskizbn*, "without beginning," used of God by Eznik and the *Teaching*, and rendering *anarchos* in Pseudo-Dionysius.⁶⁶

The Word is "inseparable" from the Father. *Ankakat'iwn*, "without separation," is used for this, as in the *Teaching* or in Eznik for the relation of the three persons of the Trinity.⁶⁷ *Yarak'ut'iwn*, "conjunction," and *anbažanut'iwn*, "indivisibility," are also used in the same sense.⁶⁸ In the *Teaching*, the similar expression *ankak arnel*, "to make inseparable," is found for Christ's joining humankind to his immortality.⁶⁹ The "essence," *ēut'iwn*, and the "will," *kamk'*, of Father and Son are one.⁷⁰ Several terms with the suffix *-kic'*, "sharing," are also used: *ēakic'*, "coessential";⁷¹ *lcakic'* and *zugakic'*, "linked together," for the unity of Father and Son, both roots meaning "yoke"; *hawasar*, "equal," can be expanded to *hawasarakic'*, "coequal."⁷² This suffix is very versatile, and *kamakic'* is used as frequently as *miakam*, "of one will." Frequent also are *patuakic'*, "of equal honor"; *pāarakic'*, "of equal glory, coglorious"; *gorcakic'*, "coworker."⁷³ In particular, to indicate the creative activity of the Son, *ararčakic'* ("cocreator") is used to explain John 1:3: "Everything was created through him."⁷⁴ The relationship with the Father is also described as one of "intimacy," *mtermut'iwn*.⁷⁵

The incarnation of the Word is frequently described by the term *tnawrēnut'iwn*, or derivatives of it, an expression exactly rendering the Greek *oikonomia*.⁷⁶ This Grecism is not found in the earliest Armenian theologians but soon appears in translated texts and is then rapidly adopted.⁷⁷

66. Eznik, §1; *Teaching* 263; Thomson 1997, 81.

67. *Teaching* 706; Eznik, §350.

68. On *anbažanut'iwn*, see also Thomson 1997 (77).

69. *Teaching* 385; cf. Lampe 1969, s.v. *atmētos*.

70. Nonnus, commentary to John 8:16b. For *ēut'iwn*, see further below, xxxix.

71. See Thomson 1997 (95), 2001 (16) for examples.

72. Nonnus, commentary to John 1:1, 2; 8:17. *Hawasar*, but not *hawasarakic'*, also appears in Pseudo-Dionysius (see Thomson 1997, 106).

73. *Gorcakic'* and *lcakic'* are found in numerous translations; see Muradyan 2012 (227); Thomson 1997 (ad loc.). For the abstract nouns *pāarak'ut'iwn* and *gorcak'ut'iwn*, see Nonnus, commentary to John 11:4. Cf. *yarak'ut'iwn*, cited just above: *yar-a-k[i]c'-ut'iwn*.

74. See also Thomson 2001, 18.

75. See Nonnus, commentary to John 15:10b. The term is used in 2 Cor 8:8 to render *gnēsion*; see Lampe 1969 (s.v. *gnēsion*) for its use in patristic writers for the Father-Son relationship.

76. See also Nonnus, commentary to John 1:5, 27, 30; 4:3; 16:7; and elsewhere.

77. Muradyan 2012, 245; *NBHL*, s.v. *tnawrēnut'iwn*. The verb and adverb, *tnawrinem* and *tnawrinabar*, are found in Pseudo-Dionysius.

Tntesut'iwn is also found in the same sense.⁷⁸ They mean “regulation of a house” (*tnawrēnut'iwn*) and “oversight of a house” (*tntesut'iwn*), and the latter is common in the Armenian New Testament to render *oikonomia*.⁷⁹ The noun *matakararut'iwn*, “service, administration, dispensation” (e.g., at John 1:4, 29; 8:29) and the corresponding verb *matakararel* (e.g., at 1:29; 8:29) are also used in Nonnus’s *Commentary* for Christ’s earthly activity.

To render “incarnation” literally, the translator uses a variety of expressions. Two are based on *mard*, “man [i.e., human being],” and *marmin*, “body/flesh”: the verb *marmnanal*, “to become flesh” (e.g., at John 1:14; 4:3; 16:9, 33) with the cognate abstract noun *marmnaworut'iwn*, “incarnation” (e.g., at 20:6–8); and the verb *mardanal*, “to become man” (e.g., at 4:3; 5:15).⁸⁰ Related to the latter is the abstract noun, *mardelut'iwn* (at 1:27), not found in the earliest Armenian texts.⁸¹ The “union” of the divine and human natures⁸² is expressed by derivatives of *mi*, “one”: the verb *mianal*, “to be one, united,” or the causative, *miac'učanel*, “to unite” (e.g., at 1:5); or the abstract nouns *miut'iwn*, “unity,” and *miaworut'iwn*, “union” (e.g., at 1:5; 3:13). The verb *xarnel*, “to mix, join,” is also used (e.g., at 3:13); this is an expression frequent in the *Teaching*, as is the verb *zgenum*, “to put on, clothe,” where the body can be called a “garment,” *patmučan*.⁸³ Once united the natures are “inseparable,” *anoroš*, and “undivided,” *anhat* (e.g., at 3:13; 8:16b).

The “essential,” *ēakan*,⁸⁴ Word, the Son of God, became a son of man through his benevolence; the two natures are united in a single name, forming an indivisible unity (at John 3:13). “We do not profess the incarnation to be in two natures, but we confess the natures became one after the ineffable union” (at 14:9). Those who do not accept this union divide Christ into two, and if there are two natures, then there are two sons (at 5:18). Christ’s nature

78. Nonnus, commentary to John 8:29.

79. For *oikonomia* in the sense of “incarnation,” see Lampe 1969 (s.v. *oikonomia*).

80. On *marmnanal* and *mardanal*, see also Thomson 1997, 109. They are not found in the *Teaching* (see Thomson 2001, 26–32: “The Incarnation of Christ”), but Eznik uses *mardanal*. Armenian very rarely uses the term *mis*, “flesh,” in the context of the incarnation; thus the distinction between *sarx* and *sōma* in Greek is rarely clear.

81. Composed of *mard* and *el*, the stem of the verb “to be” (cf. *an-el* above) plus the abstract ending *-ut'iwn*. It occurs in the *Homilies* attributed to Elišē; see NBHL, s.v. *mardelut'iwn*.

82. This is usually described as “ineffable,” *ančar*.

83. See Thomson 2001 (26–27) for other terms used in that text. In Nonnus, see commentary to John 6:57 (*zgenum*) and 19:23 (*zgenum patmučan*). For such terms, see also Brock 1982.

84. *Ēakan* is frequent in Eznik (e.g., §3) and Pseudo-Dionysius; Thomson 1997, 95; cf. *ēakic'* above as well as *xl* for the suffix *-akan*.

is divine, but he has “kinship,” *azgak’ut’iwn*, with our weakness in accordance with his “bodily condition,” *marmnaworut’iwn* (at 11:21; 12:27a).⁸⁵ He has “bodily kinship,” *azgakanut’iwn marmnaworut’ean*, with us from the Virgin (at 15:1).

The act of incarnation was one of “condescension,” *zijanel*, or “emptying,” *t’ap’umn*.⁸⁶ The human condition of the incarnate Word is rendered by several expressions, *karik’*, *kargk’*, and *kirk’*, all of which indicate those things that befall a human person in the sense of the Greek *pathē*, “experiences,” often misleadingly translated as “passions.”⁸⁷ These can be qualified: *tnawrinakan kargk’*, for example, of the incarnation; *ankakutean kargk’*, for the state of inseparability; or *marmnakan kirk’*, bodily accidents.⁸⁸ This human condition was willingly accepted; and Nonnus frequently stresses the willingness of the Son to undergo his passion for the salvation of the world.

Nonnus stresses that the incarnation was real and not “apparent,” *ar ač’awk’*,⁸⁹ or “seeming,” *erewuteamb*, but Christ took a body “truly,” *čšmartapēs* (at John 4:3, 6). On the other hand, it is always made clear that Christ was not overcome by human sufferings, like us; he allowed these failings of the human condition to affect him (at 4:6). Emotions could not really be active in him, in the way that they overcome us; when he wished he condescended to food and drink and sleep (at 11:33). Christ possesses his own will, though it is always in accordance with that of the Father (at 6:38), for Son and Father have *anjnišxanut’iwn*, “independence of will” (at 16:13b). Christ’s body is not subject to death, like other bodies, because he is not subject to the consequences of sin. But death he accepted willingly because of his love for creation; for by his death creatures will receive immortal life (at 14:30).

Throughout the commentary Nonnus distinguishes between the “sublime,” or “highest [aspects],” and the “humblest,” in contrasting Christ’s divinity and humanity: he uses the expressions *barjragoynk’* for the former, and

85. *Azgak’ut’iwn* (i.e., *azg-a-k[i]c’-ut’iwn*) also appears in Pseudo-Dionysius; Thomson 1997, 75. *Azg* has a wide range of uses: “genus,” “kind, people,” “ethnic group, gender,” or “sort.”

86. *Zijanel*: e.g., at John 4:32, in the context of Christ eating; *t’ap’umn*: 10:11 (lit. “emptying”); his being weary, 4:6.

87. See, e.g., commentary to John 4:32–34: “He condescended to those things that derive from nature in order to confirm the dispensation of his incarnation, that he had a body not in appearance or as an illusion but truly.” From the stem *kir*, the verb *krel* is used for “enduring, undergoing, suffering.”

88. See, e.g., commentary to John 1:1, 26–27; 21:1; cf. *tnawrinakan xorhurd*, “the mystery of the incarnation,” at 14:23; 17:4; 19:30.

89. *Ar ač’awk’* is widely used to indicate a phantom; e.g., Matt 14:26; Mark 6:49, *phantasma*, of Christ walking on the water.

for the latter, *nuastagoynk'* or *xonarhagoynk'*. The sublime is not transformed into the humble, but these characteristics are shared by communication (at John 10:11). The human in Christ is composed of body and soul, which are both united with his divinity after the resurrection (at 10:17–18). The soul of a human can exist apart from the body, as in the case of Lazarus for the time he was in the tomb (at 11:43). In that case, Christ “wrested it from the Devil” and rejoined it to the body.

In the commentary to the first verse several other important terms appear that are common to all Armenian authors: *ēut'iwn* for “being,” or “essence,” to which the verb *goyanal* corresponds in the sense that the Word does not take his being from another.⁹⁰ To express equality of essence of Father and Son, *ēakic'* can be used; and *ēakan* is used for “essential.”⁹¹ *Bnut'iwn* is the term for “nature,” the Greek *physis*. *Zawrut'iwn* is more ambiguous: the basic meaning is “force” or “power,” but it is also used for “hypostasis.”⁹² “Person” is unambiguously rendered by *anjnaworut'iwn*, though *eresk'* (lit. “face”) is also found (at John 8:30).⁹³ The Trinity is defined as *ēranjean ew ezakay astuacut'iwn* (lit. “triple person and single Godhead”).⁹⁴

Nonnus is primarily concerned with the incarnate nature of the Word: “The Word was God and became man.” Throughout his commentary the focus is on the relationship of the Father and Son; but the role of the Holy Spirit is not totally neglected. As explained at John 15:26, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and is thus distinguished from the angelic powers. There is no

90. See also above, n 84. The root *ē*, “being,” occurs in the commentary to 3:13. *Ēut'iwn* is found in all Armenian authors. Its formation is unusual, in that *ē* is the third-person singular of the verb “to exist,” whereas Armenian generally builds compounds from verbal stems or nouns; likewise from the third-person singular verb *goy* is derived *goyut'iwn*, “being.” Cf. the Syriac abstract noun for “essence,” *ʿytut'*, derived from the verb form *ʿyt*. But see also Muradyan 2012 (121–22). For the stem *goy* and its derivatives, see Thomson 1997 (91), 2001 (16). *Iskut'iwn*, “essence,” is found in Nonnus, commentary to John 1:18, but it is not common; cf. *Teaching* 383. In Pseudo-Dionysius it renders *tautotēs*; Thomson 1997 (99). It is noteworthy that it does not appear in the lexicon of technical terms compiled by Dorfmann-Lazarev (2004, 269–83) from the correspondence between Armenians and Byzantines in the ninth century.

91. See above, n. 84.

92. See Nonnus, commentary to John 1:1 (Č'raġean, 16): *patmolakan zawrut'ean han-gamank'*, “the manner [or “circumstances”] of the historical hypostasis.”

93. *Anjn* means “person” or “self”; e.g., John 5:18: he “made *himself* equal to God.” *Anjnaworut'iwn* is the abstract noun from the adjectival form *anjn-awor*; this is not used in the Armenian Bible but is found in later writers, meaning “alive, having a *psychē*”; see examples in *NBHL*, s.v. *anjnaworut'iwn*.

94. In the translator's own addition to the “Exhortation” at the end of ch. 10 (Č'raġean, 242).

distinction regarding the nature of Father, Son, and Spirit: they are separate in “person,” *anjaworut’iwn*, but united by “nature,” *bnut’iwn* (at 16:13). The Spirit is “equal,” *hawasarakic’*, in glory and nature (at 17:12).⁹⁵

PURPOSE OF THE COMMENTARY AND ITS LATER INFLUENCE

On several occasions Nonnus refers to his opponents: those who do not understand the scriptures properly or who misinterpret the nature of Christ. In the former category he mocks the Jews as “thick-witted,” *tanjramit*, or “dim-witted,” *karčamit*, because they are too literal in their understanding of the Old Testament. Since the Gospel of John prominently features debates between Christ and the Jews, according to Nonnus these attacks are directed against those who reject the divine nature of Christ and the Son of God. And because they are so frequent and deal only in general terms with those who fail to recognize Christ’s divinity, it has been suggested that Nonnus, or perhaps his translator, had a more topical opponent in mind, namely, the Muslims who accepted Jesus as a prophet only and not as the Son of God.⁹⁶ To that we shall return.

More specific are the descriptions of those who are supposedly Christian but who misinterpret the sense of the incarnation and the nature of the incarnate Word. In his commentary to the very first verse, Nonnus refers to the Arians, who deny the eternity of the Son; and at John 14:9 he associates with Arius the name of Eunomius, who with his supporters confessed the Son to be created.⁹⁷ Such persons are called “Gentile tongues,” *het’anosakan lezuk’*, who posit the Son as created and coming into being in time (at 1:2). The noun “schism,” *herjuac*, is used to describe those who might think that the Son was less than the Spirit (at 16:13). And Nonnus refers to “schismatics,” *herjuacolk’*, who deny that spiritual beings were created by the Word as “cocreator,” *ararčakic’*, at the same time as the tangible creatures of this world (at 1:3).⁹⁸ The same term “schismatics” is also applied to those who claim that Christ possessed a body in the form of an apparition and not in reality (at

95. For *hawasarakic’*, see also above, xxxvi.

96. See Črakean’s introduction, p. žž (18); he quotes Sargisean 1897 in support.

97. See also commentary to 8:57. Eunomius and Arius first appear together in Armenian in the version of the *Tome* of Proclus; see the *Book of Letters*; translation and commentary in Garsoïan 1999 (420–31).

98. The Syriac version of the *Hexaemeron* of Basil of Caesarea omits the section where Basil discusses the creation of angels prior to that of the world, hence the Armenian text (translated from Syriac) contains no reference to that debate. It was a topic that much interested Syrian theologians; see Thomson 2012 (n. 58 to *Homily* 1.4).

4:3).⁹⁹ Not all “opponents,” *hakarakoł*, are explicitly named. Some of them disputed that Christ could illuminate all who were to come into the world, as at 1:9, for there are obviously people who do not know Christ. In more general terms, the translator refers to the “unorthodoxy,” *čaraparut’iwn*, of the schismatics in contrast to the “orthodoxy,” *ullaparut’iwn*, of the faith.¹⁰⁰

Nonnus’s main opponents, however, are those who claim that one can speak of two natures in the incarnate Christ. He claims that they interpret the actions of the human Christ as of a body separate and distinct from the Word; and if there are two natures, then there are two distinct and separate sons (at John 5:18).¹⁰¹ Such persons are “dividers,” *bažanołk’*, of the one Christ into two natures (at 6:62; 8:57). They are “dyophysites,” *erkbnačk’*, and “schismatics,” *herjuacołk’* (at 8:57; 20:28).¹⁰² In addition to those who speak of two natures, those who propose two wills in Christ are equally attacked. They are “lovers of contrariness,” *hakarakasērk’*, who interpret Christ’s saying, “I descended from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me,” as implying that Christ had two wills in opposition to each other (at 6:38). In this regard also, the commentary fits the general Armenian viewpoint that eventually rejected both the Chalcedonian formula of two natures and the seventh-century compromise of two wills.¹⁰³ As Garsoïan has pointed out, in the long run the Armenian Church pursued a course of moderate miaphysitism, more correctly defined as the theology of Cyril of Alexandria.¹⁰⁴

A further group is attacked, “our opponents,” *hakarakołk’ mez*, who do not accept the Trisagion as sung in the Armenian fashion—that is, with the addition “who was crucified for us” directed to the Savior. The author claims that both John and Paul uphold his interpretation of Isaiah’s vision.¹⁰⁵ The same interpretation of the Trisagion occurs in the “Exhortation” at the end of chapter 10. And in the extensive passage of exhortation added after the commentary to John 19:37, primarily a paean to the cross added by the translator,

99. Yovhannēs Ojniec’i also wrote against such heretics, called “Phantasiasts,” *erewuťakank’*.

100. See the translator’s addition to the “Exhortation” at the end of ch. 10 (Č’rakēan, 244).

101. The argument that two natures implies two sons is forcefully pushed by those who adapted the Armenian translations of Athanasius; see Thomson 1965.

102. *Erk-b[u]n-ak* renders “dyo-phys-ite” literally.

103. This compromise, known as monothelitism (promoted by the emperor Heraclius, who had also earlier suggested the idea of one “activity” [*energeia*] in Christ), was rejected by the Council of Constantinople in 681.

104. Garsoïan 1999, 399.

105. Nonnus, commentary to John 12:41; see Isa 6:1–3.

the same idea is repeated: the six-winged seraphim sing their triple “holy” to the one on the cross.¹⁰⁶

This commentary shows little trace of extreme Julianist ideas concerning the incorruptibility of Christ’s body.¹⁰⁷ Only once does the author specifically state that Christ’s body was incorruptible, and then only in the context of the dead body placed in the tomb after the crucifixion: “Nor in the tomb like our bodies was it corrupted and turned into its individual elements, but it remained always incorruptible and indissoluble [*anapakan ew anlucaneli*], united with the divine Word, who was pleased to become flesh, in accordance with the Gospel saying, for the salvation of mankind” (at John 19:23–24). Nonnus refers to our human nature as “corruptible” and sinful; but when the Word united it with his own (divine) nature it was rendered “luminous,” and it burned with his divinity through the ineffable union (at 1:5). Elsewhere the term “incorruptible” is used in a liturgical context of Christ’s body and blood (at 6:59; 9:35–37, 55), of heavenly rewards (at 6:27),¹⁰⁸ and of the “incorruptible” and “luminous” robe of which Adam and Eve were stripped in the garden of Eden (at 12:31a).¹⁰⁹ In the context of Christ’s earthly activity, when he condescended to the human situation without his divine nature being compromised, the body was not distinct or separate from the Word (e.g., at 5:18); but the term “incorruptible” is not used.

The foregoing analysis of the terminology used in this *Commentary* indicates that the author’s theology of the incarnation was in accordance with prior Armenian tradition and that the translator was familiar with Armenian usage. In his introduction, the editor of the printed edition comments on the compatibility of this theology with later Armenian expositions.¹¹⁰ But the history of Armenian theology is not our present concern. The following annotation to the translation of the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* by Nonnus is an attempt to understand the background of the author’s exegesis, rooted in earlier Syrian and Greek tradition.

106. The addition to the Trisagion by Peter the Fuller in the later fifth century was accepted by Syrian as well as Armenian miaphysites. For its use in Armenia, see Garitte 1952 (167–70).

107. For the influence in Armenia of ideas concerning the incorruptibility of Christ’s body as propounded by Julian of Halicarnassus, see Garitte 1952 (117–30); Garsoïan 1999 (ch. 3); and Mathews and Sanjian 1991 (160).

108. Cf. the commentary to John 19:41, of our body raised to heavenly incorruption.

109. See also the “Exhortation” appended to ch. 10 (Č’rakëan, 244). On the luminous robe, see Brock 1982.

110. See esp. Č’rakëan, pp. *ie* (25) and *l* (30), where he gives parallels with the *Letter of Vahan* and with the twelfth-century theologians Nersēs Šnorhali and Nersēs of Lambron.

One further question remains, adumbrated above. Did Bagrat Bagratuni, who commissioned the *Commentary*, have a more topical opponent in mind, namely, the Muslims who accepted Jesus as a prophet only and not as the Son of God? The translator in his preface states: “He [Bagrat] always suffered no little zeal for Christ in order to admonish and reprove the ranks of the schismatics.”¹¹¹ And the translator stresses that Nonnus himself, who was also imprisoned with his sons, was continually teaching and making opposition to the Muslims.¹¹² Are the emphasis in the *Commentary* on Christ’s divine nature and the attacks on the Jews who refused to recognize it hidden attacks on the Muslim refusal to accept Christ’s divinity? This was the suggestion of Barseł Sargisean, followed by the editor of the text and later writers on the subject.¹¹³ Sargisean claims that Nonnus’s eloquence was directed against the Islam of the ninth-century Muslims, when Armenian apostasies were only too frequent.

The Gospel of John, of course, puts much emphasis on Christ’s divinity and uses dialogue with Jews as a rhetorical means to that effect. And in the context of the debate at Ašot Bagratuni’s court, where the anti-Chalcedonian view concerning the person of Christ prevailed, John’s Gospel makes an excellent starting point. Although there is no reference to Islam in this *Commentary*, which supports at length the miaphysite Armenian viewpoint of the ninth century, the translator does note that when in captivity Bagrat Bagratuni was particularly anxious to possess knowledge of the Christian faith.¹¹⁴ In the near-contemporary debate between Patriarch Timothy I (Timotheos) of the Syrians and the Caliph Al-Mahdī, the Gospel of John is the biblical book most alluded to, though not the most quoted verbatim.¹¹⁵ That disputation was also held in Arabic, but Timothy (patriarch 780–823) wrote the description of it as an apology in Syriac.

The original debate at Ašot Bagratuni’s court between Theodore Abū Qurrah and Nonnus was prompted by internal Christian differences. His son Bagrat, however, saw the significance of John’s Gospel, which would have been

111. Schismatics: *herjuacolk’*, for which see above. This is not the usual Armenian term for Muslims, which is “foreigners,” *aylazgik’*, or “Hagarenes.”

112. Nonnus was released in 862; see Vardan Arewelc’i, *Historical Compilation*; Kirakos Ganjakec’i, *History*, quoted just below.

113. Sargisean 1897 (26); Ć’rakēan (introduction, p. žē [18]); Mariès 1920–21 (292); Griffith 1991.

114. Admittedly, that was long after the commission to Nonnus. This commentary is not cited in Armenian attacks on the origin of Islam (see Thomson 1986), but its influence on later Armenian writers generally has yet to be properly studied.

115. See the introduction to Heimgartner’s edition of Timotheos, *Disputation with Caliph Al-Mahdī*.

cited in the debate, in the wider context of discussions between Christians and Muslims concerning the person of Jesus Christ. His own personal interest lay more with the latter. *Habent sua fata libelli*. What began as an overt defense of orthodoxy as viewed by Nonnus and his tradition could well be used for other purposes, especially as the text was in Arabic. By the time it was translated into Armenian, its owner, the young princess Marem of Siwnik, had little interest in debates with Muslims. The Arabic was not preserved, and the Armenian text entered the mainstream of Armenian theological literature without any indication of its original Muslim connection.¹¹⁶

As noted above, Nonnus's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was quoted by later Armenian writers on that Gospel. Outside of circles involved in biblical exegesis, however, direct references to Nonnus's *Commentary* are rare. Its wide circulation in manuscripts indicates that the text was known in monastic scriptoria from the twelfth century onward. Prior to that time, even historians fail to mention Nonnus, or Nanay, as he was known in Armenian, though they do mention Ašot *Msaker*, who hosted the debate between Theodore and Nonnus; his son Bagrat, who later apostatized; his brother Smbat, known as "the confessor"; and Marem, who had the text translated. However, memory of the debate resurfaces in the thirteenth century.

Kirakos Ganjakec'i refers briefly to the imprisonment of Nonnus, as mentioned by the translator in his preface. In his *History*, which concludes in 1265, Kirakos notes: "A certain Syrian deacon, Nanay by name, was arrested and brought before Jafr [the Caliph Djafar al-Mutawwakil, 847–61] because of his fame as a teacher. He boldly confessed Christ, though he was tortured and imprisoned for a long time. Later, by God's providence, he was released. He composed a *Commentary on the Gospel of John* in illuminating language."¹¹⁷ Kirakos's contemporary Vardan Arewelc'i refers directly to the famous debate in his *Historical Compilation*, written soon after 1267. In somewhat garbled terms he states: "In those days [i.e., of Ašot Bagratuni] a bishop, Epikuřa by name [Abū Qurrah], came to Ašot and tried to convert him to Chalcedon. When Buret [Abū Ra'ita] heard of this he dispatched the deacon Nanay, who came and disputed with Apikuřa, defeating him by the power of the Holy Spirit. So the prince expelled him and was confirmed even more in the faith of Saint Gregory. Then Ašot died in his bed, and Smbat his son took the principality."¹¹⁸

116. Save for the translator's comments about Bagrat in his preface. In this context, cf. Accad 1998.

117. Kirakos Ganjakec'i, *History*, 79. For a brief description of the life and works of Kirakos, see Boisson-Chenorhokian 2005–7.

118. Vardan Arewelc'i, *Historical Compilation*, 78. Note the variation in the spelling of Epikuřa.

This is echoed briefly in the chronicle of Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i, which ends in 1328: "Epikuřa attempted to make prince Ařot a Chalcedonian, but Buret vardapet sent his deacon Nanay, who vanquished Epikuřa and wrote a commentary on [*mekneac'*] the Gospel of John."¹¹⁹

Vardan Arewelc'i, however, adds a further piece of information associating Nonnus with a much later event in Armenia, the Council of řirakavan in 862: "Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, in the year 318 [869] sent the metropolitan of Nicaea Yohan to him [Ařot] bearing a letter for Zak'aria [Catholicos 855–877] in response to the question: 'Why was the fourth council held?' A council was convened in řirakavan, attended by the Syrian deacon Nanay. He had been brought close to death by Jap'r on account of the faith, but was released because of a fearful vision."¹²⁰ Vardan then proceeds to summarize the letter.

The correspondence between Photius and the Armenians has naturally attracted much attention, though in the long run it had little effect on the Armenians' theological position.¹²¹ The council to which Vardan refers had been summoned to discuss the question of union of the two churches proposed in the letter from Photius, and the presence of Nonnus is attested in the introductory colophon to the Armenian text of the *Treatise of Vahan*, where he is called "a great deacon and a renowned philosopher [*sarkawag mec ew hr'čakeal p'ilisop'os*]." More significantly, the basic theology of Nonnus, "one Son from two natures," is echoed in that *Treatise*.¹²²

The presence of Nonnus at řirakavan is certainly not impossible. He was a young deacon at the time of the debate before Ařot Bagratuni, when according to Michael the Syrian, Theodore refused to argue with such a young opponent.¹²³ The council took place less than fifty years later. What influence Nonnus personally had at that gathering is impossible to tell. The enthusiastic opinion of the Mekhitarist scholar Mik'ayel Čamčean, whose influential

119. Mxit'ar Ayrivanec'i, *History* (Patkanean, 67).

120. Vardan Arewelc'i, *Historical Compilation*, 82.

121. See recently Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004, with bibliography of previous scholarship. His interpretations have been challenged by Greenwood (2006), who gives a clear exposé of the extended correspondence and argues for the authenticity of Photius's *Letter*, known as the *Treatise of Vahan* (Yohan in Vardan) bishop of Nicaea, which had been denied by Garitte 1952 (370–75). See also the summary in Mahé 1993 (492–95); and for the council, Maksoudian 1988–89.

122. See the comparison of the texts in Dorfmann-Lazarev 2004 (153–54); translation of Vahan's treatise, *ibid.* (1–19).

123. See Maksoudian 1988–89 (336–37), referring to the Syriac text of Michael the Syrian's *Chronicle*; the Armenian version does not refer to Nonnus or the Council of řirakavan.

History of Armenia (Patmut'iwn Hayoc') takes the story from creation down to 1784, that at Širakavan Nonnus united the Syrians and Armenians has no evidence to support it.¹²⁴ But if the person of Nonnus played little role in Armenian theological debates after his dramatic encounter with Theodore Abū Qurrah, and his name disappears until the thirteenth century, his influence continued to affect Armenian interpretations of the Gospel of John for many centuries.

To his *Commentary* and its background in Greek and Syrian exegesis we now turn, beginning with the unknown translator's own preface.



124. See Ananean, *Zakaria Hayoc' Kat'olikosi* 1995 (57), quoting from Č'amč'ean 1784–86 (2:687).