

Frederic Conybeare's Translation of Hovhannes Yerets Khnusetsi's *The Key of Truth*



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The classical Armenian and English versions of the 18th century ecclesiastic Hovhannes Yerets Khnusetsi's work *The Key of Truth* are devoted to the worship and ritual order of the Paulikians, a religious-heretical movement in Armenia. The editor and translator of the original text was Frederic Conybeare (1898).

The Key of Truth was written in 1782 in the Province of Taron. Not only the book, but the Introduction and the Chronicle attached to it are of great interest. Conybeare's version is based on a manuscript with some parts either missing or erased. What Conybeare did was publishing *The Key of Truth* in grabar (classical Armenian), adding his own corrections and comments to the original.

The Paulikian religious heresy is rather old. Like the Tondrakiyts sect it was widely spread in Armenia. But the doctrine of the Paulikians was closer to the ideology of the official church, and it was for this reason that it survived for rather a long period among Armenian clergymen. It is notable that the leaders of the Tondrakiyts doctrine had once belonged to the high clergy.

Aristakes Lastivertsi's *History* gives the most detailed evidence about the Tondrakiyts; the two chapters of this work are entirely devoted to the criticism of the mentioned sect (Chapter 22, *On the Tondrakiyts' Evil Sect Which Appeared in the Province of Harq and Deluded Great Many People*; Chapter 23, *How the Fire of This Delusion Spread in Mananaghi*).¹

Portraying one of the leaders of the Tondrakiyts' leaders, Bishop Hakobos, Aristakes Lastivertsi comments: "A certain bishop, named Hakobos, who was the overseer of the churches in the province of Harq, pretended to be a righteous man; he wore rags, fasted and would walk bare-footed, he chose priests, who would follow him dressed in plain clothes, refused to partake of delicious food and sang psalms. ...But all this was false and not true... Even Our Lord, speaking about them, warned in his preaching: "Take care not to be misled by false prophets who will approach you in sheep's hide, but are wolves inside."² This very Hakobos then began preaching against Christ.

Frederic Conybeare translated *the Key of Truth* in order to acquaint the European theologians with the teaching of the Paulikians. The manuscript was discovered under the following circumstances. In 1891, during his stay in Russian Armenia, Conybeare was working in Echmiadzin library. He was looking for the Armenian translation of

*Enoch's Book*³ but accidentally came across a writing concerning the sect of the Paulikians. Conybeare knew quite well the importance of his discovery.

In 1893, owing to G. Ter-Mkrtchian, Conybeare got a copy of the manuscript he had ordered and in 1898 he published *The Key of Truth* as a book. The opening parts of this volume touch upon questions of heresy, pages 1-65 include the original text in Armenian, pages 69-124 contain the English translation of the original, and pages 125-178 present anti-heretical writings by Grigor Narekatsi (St. Gregory of Narek), Grigor Magistros, Hovhan Odznetsi and Nerses Shnorhali.

In his work *Unknown Armenian Sects in 16-17th Centuries*, Tadevos Avdالبekian mentions *The Key of Truth*. He was familiar with Conybeare's translation and quotes from it.⁴ He writes: "The faith root of the New Tondrakiyts, *The Key of Truth* openly calls Jesus *The New Adam, Jesus the Man, Jesus the New Man, A New Creature and Not a Creator*, whereas Mary, the Blessed Virgin is called merely *A Woman*."⁵

Tadevos Avdالبekian notes that the early Tondrakiyts rejected baptism and the eucharist. This cannot be said of the late Tondrakiyts, who accepted both sacraments: "Four are They which save man, First, Repentance, Second Right Faith, Third Holy Baptism, And fourth the holy precious body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ".⁶

Accepting the mentioned sacraments of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the late Paulikians rejected confirmation, holy Orders, anointing of the sick and matrimony, and suggested they "are not salvation of our souls, but are unnecessary and not obligatory."⁷

The aim of *The Key of Truth* is clarified in the section of the book entitled *A Word to the Beloved Reader*. Here the author confesses the difficulties he has experienced while compiling such a responsible work: "although the throng of distractions and the temptations and storms of the world, and the manifold hindrances, strong to disturb our transitory life in various ways,- although these have sorely beset us and suffered us not to undertake this necessary work".

However, inspired by heavenly thoughts, urged by the interests of the Armenian Church and in order to make the communal life of his people healthier, he fulfills the commands of Christ. Every Christian and every Christian family must live and survive according to the commandments of Our Lord's Son and never swerve from them. We must believe in Jesus Christ, be christened according to His orders and deserve eternal life for "he who shall not believe, shall be judged"⁸ A reader inexperienced in theology can hardly notice sectarian layer in *The Key of Truth*. The ideas of the Gospel writers are constantly repeated here. The author completely agrees with them and only in a few cases seems to deviate from them. In the Introduction of the work Hovhannes Yerets confesses that while narrating the work he had the inspiration of his Heavenly Father but wrote "in a brief and discreet manner."

In the Chronicle F. Conybeare expresses his disappointment concerning the missing and erased parts of the manuscript. In some cases he skillfully restores the missing fragments, as, for example in the conclusion of the metrical parts attached to the Introduction: This brief discourse shall ye search and deeply o'er it meditate. If it please you, then revere it, as it were a voice of thunder.⁹

Conybeare rightly mentions that the text of the Chronicle is incomplete too. In the

corresponding part of the Chronicle, in the postscript he adds: “One or more pages of Ms. Are here lost.”⁷¹⁰

The Chronicle itself is of great value. In the first place it shows the condition of Armenian manuscript writing in the last quarter of the 18th century, when Armenians had their printing houses in different parts of the world. Second, the art of manuscript writing went on to develop on paper and the scribes were worrying about the fate of their works in case they were copied by hand.

The mentioned fact was especially important in case of Hovhannes Yerets’ manuscript for, as he mentions in the Introduction of the work, it was addressed to the whole nation, including Armenia proper and numerous Armenian colonies in countries of Europe and Asia. Faithful to the mindset of medieval manuscript writing, he mentions in the preserved part of the Chronicle that there can be some shortcomings in his narrative: “Moreover, I humbly entreat you with warm love and faith to forgive the shortcomings, the insufficiencies, and the faults of composition or of grammar. And also as touching the syllables, or writing, or verbs or nouns or eight parts of the art”⁷¹¹:

Conybeare suggests that the shortcomings might have appeared through the carelessness of the unskilled copiers: “If in regard to them ye find any errors or shortcomings, they are not due to ourselves, but have found their way into it as being of unpractised copyists”⁷¹²:

In the grabar (classical Armenian) text the scholar points to the missing fragments, sometimes correcting errors of the copyists or adding versions he thinks to be more correct. Judging from the Chronicle, we can say that there have been some metrical parts in the original version, which the author had written drawing inspiration from the relevant parts of the Gospel.

Chapter 19 speaks of the importance of the baptismal rite. It recounts of Christ’s followers, the disciples Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene, Simon’s Mother-in-law and others. “For they with great contrition received glory and honour from Jesus Christ our Saviour, as is clear in the holy gospel, and in the acts of the holy Apostles, and elsewhere”⁷¹³:

According to Conybeare, the fragment is incomplete and a metrical part should have been attached to it. In his commentaries he writes: “Here, two leaves lost, in MS, four pages, 74-77, torn out.”⁷¹⁴ The preserved part of the fragment reads as follows:

Come my children of the new Zion,
Take on you the crown of the Lord Jesus.
Cherish in yourselves each word spoken
Take your places in the ranks on the right hand
If ye listen into the Church
The infinite God shall save you.⁷¹⁵

In the margins of *The Key of Truth* there are matching commentaries explaining what writings, considered sacred in terms of Christian religion, the author has made use of in order to narrate the given fragment. The list includes excerpts from the Gospels of

Matthew, Mark and John, Genesis and Exodus parts of the Old Testament, the Letters of Apostle Paul to Hebrews and the Philippians. In the margins one can find explanations of some Christian symbols as well.

The discussed writing by Hovhannes Yerets reveals the scholar's desire to make the faithful of the Armenian Church the followers of *The Key of Truth*. This was a serious threat for the official Church. The dangerous fact of joining a heresy was especially perilous because of the absence of Armenian statehood, and the Church saw itself entirely responsible for the national unity. The devoted and patriotic fathers of the Church were those who would realize this difficult mission. Connybeare was skilled in Armenian ecclesiastical literature, especially writings which struggled against heretical doctrines, contrary to or incompatible with the ideology of the Official Church. The Middle Ages have known numerous fighters for the purity of faith against heretical doctrines. Connybeare appended to the English translation of *The Key of Truth* some anti-heretical works and papers of Grigor Narekatsi (St. Gregori of Narek), Hovhannes Odznetsi, Grigor Magistros and Nerses Shnorhali.

The contents of the annotation to these writings disclose the anxiety of the aforementioned scholars. Chapter 21 of *The Key of Truth* is entitled: "About Our Lord Jesus Christ, That As He Laid Down Canons And Precepts, So Do We Proceed With God's Help."

Hovhannes Yerets points to the place¹⁶ in Luke's Gospel which describes the Baptism of Christ. "During a general baptism of the people, when Jesus too had been baptized and was praying, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove, and there came a voice from heaven, You are my beloved Son. In you I delight."

The works criticizing heresies show clearly that heretical doctrines disavowed many rites of the Christian Church, baptism in the first place. Hovhannes Odznetsi, the Catholicos of Armenians in 717-728, wrote a document entitled *Against the Paulikians*¹⁷. Warnings against the Paulikians are found in the *Canons*¹⁸ of the same author. Hovhannes Odznetsi calls the Paulikians impious heretics who should be avoided. They should not be given shelter nor should anyone talk to them, as they are the descendants of the Evil one, who have forgotten about their love towards Our Lord. The one who joins them or is gracious towards them should be tortured and severely punished.

Grigor Magistros in his *Letter 67* writes that the Paulikians know the Holy Gospel and the Books of the Apostles perfectly well but reject Baptism and call it a death¹⁹.

Another work directed against heresies, Tondrakiyts in particular, is Grigor Narekatsi's *Letter*. Poghos Khachatryan has rightly mentioned that the Paper is the expression of Narekatsi's true resentment: "The reading of the *Letter* reveals Narekatsi's wrath towards Smbat Zarehavantsi and his followers. His feelings are so earnest that it would be an error to think he is concealing his true vision of the question."²⁰ In the *Letter* G. Narekatsi strictly condemns Zarehavantsi sending curses and imprecations on him.

Many interpretative works have been written to deepen the true Christian faith among Armenians and to make the Old and New Testaments understandable for them. What is more, analogous works have been written in non-Christian surroundings, for

Christians living among Muslims. A noteworthy example is Kahlil Gibran's *Prophet*, a work which is recognized internationally.²¹

Hovhannes Yerets' *The Key of Truth* includes 22 chapters.²² Further the chapters are not enumerated and interrogative marks stand instead of chapter numbers. Certain chapters include ritual instructions. Thus for instance: "And after the reading of Paul, tis meet for the elect one to ask the name of the catechumen: 'By what name do ye desire to call this catechumen according to law and not with a fabulous name?' And then he readeth the holy gospel, Luke ii 21."²³

In the corresponding part of the Gospel according to Luke it is said that "Eight days later the time came to circumcise him, and he was given the name Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived" Luke 1, 2, 21.

The *Key of Truth* is rich in poetic devices characteristic of medieval literature. Its poetics is closely connected to the poetics of the Bible. A good example is the device of question and answer. Below we quote the following two passages:

Concerning the Christian Doctrine

Question. Art thou a Christian?

Answer. Yes, I am a Christian by the grace of Christ.

Q. How are we to define a Christian?

A. Thus-one who Knows our Lord Jesus Christ, what he is and keeps his commandments.

Q. What is the command and precept of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we keep?

A. That which our Lord prescribed to his disciples and his faithful, saying: "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments. As I also have kept the commandments of my Father".

Q. How many are the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ?

A. These. First, Hope, Second, Repentance, Third, Faith, Fourth, Baptism, Fifth, Communion, Sixth, Love, which is chief of all.

Q. What is Christ, and as what must we know him and believe him to be?

A. Even as the universal and apostolic holy Church believed, so must we also believe.

Q. How did the blessed apostles believe? Teach us.

A. As St. John the Evangelist showeth, saying: "We have believed and know that thou art Christ, the Son of God who wast to come into the world".

Q. So then, as touching those who baptize catechumens, is their baptism true or vain?

A. It is vain and a fraud. For catechumens have not repentance, have not hope, neither have they the holy faith. Wherefore their baptism is not true and is not salvation.

Q. Then whose baptism and communion is valid?

A. Their holy baptism and communion only is valid who have original and operative sin²⁴:

Similar questions and answers can be found in the concluding parts of *The Key of Truth*, in the chapter entitled: "Concerning The Judgement That Is One And Not Two."

Question. How many judgements of God are there as touching the dead and the living?

Answer. There is but one judgement and not two.

Q. Then, if there is one judgement of God which he holdeth through Christ; why do some gainsayers say that there are two judgements and not one - the one, they say, private and apart, and the other universal.

A. They thus speak lies merely because their father is Satan. Even as our Lord says, that which he speaketh false he speaketh out of his own, and his father is Satan.

Q. I pray thee, venerable father, to give us instruction as touching how many judgements there be.

A. I tell thee that the universal and apostolic church confesses one only, saying that man dies once and after that is judgement. This is the meaning of the holy church, that as for man death comes once, so also will his resurrection and judgement be one and not two.

Q. Then did Christ, our Lord and intercessor, truly know the wickedness of their minds, who have established false and monstrous laws, or did he not ?

A. Yes, venerable father, he truly knew, and therefore said: "Beware of evil workers," and "by their fruits ye shall know them" who are disciples of lies and deceit, and not of my truth. As the holy church expressly declareth.

Q. Did our Lord Jesus Christ really know the day of judgement or no?

A. Since the heavenly Father, true God, did not reveal that day to his beloved Son; as he saith concerning the end of the world: "No man knoweth it, not the angels in heaven, nor the Son; but the Father alone". Further he saith: "Out of my own self I speak nothing; but whatsoever command my Father gave me, that I speak." Behold, my reverent one, how Christ, the Son of God, of his own self could not say aught, unless his Father revealed it to him.

Q. But forasmuch as our Lord Jesus Christ could not by himself without the ordinance of God know the day of judgement, how do some gainsayers declare, in opposition to the truth of the Son of God, that there is a separate judgement and place of expiation for sinners?

A. Because, as I at the first told thee, they are the heritors of their father's deceit; and through the spirit of that same evil one they ever and always ordain false laws and false precepts. Behold, my loved one, their teacher, who has disguised himself in the form of a monk and preached unto them the torments of hell, in order to ensnare their souls."²⁵

Conybeare's bilingual edition of *The Key of Truth* is an important philological contribution to Armeniology, it is a significant scholarly attempt to make Armenian spiritual literature better-known to the international reader. Nevertheless, the work has not yet been subjected to philological examination.

Interstingly, Conybeare's *The Key of Truth* is considered in terms of marxism-leninism in H.Gabrielian's *History of Armenian Philosophy*.

The Armenian part of *The Key of Truth* ends in Conybeare's Chronicle written in classical Armenian, a fact which shows the scholar's great love towards Armenia and Armenian manuscript-writing: "I, Frederic Conybeare, the humblest of Oxford teachers,

an Armenist and an admirer of Armenia, after having found a copy of the manuscript called *The Key of Truth*, translated it into my native English and printed it through the order and expense of Oxford University vardapets, wise and noble people in their printing house in 1895 anno Domini.

I was down-hearted for numerous pages of the manuscript were lost because of the carelessness of certain people. I was never able to restore them and, hence, could not print the complete manuscript including the church rites, of which the scribe informs us in the Chronicle. For this reason, I implore those who will find a complete copy of the manuscript to send it to me in order that I will be able to print its missing parts.”

Notes and References:

1. Lastivertsi Aristakes. *Patmutyun*. Yerevan, 1971, pp. 86-98.
2. Ibid, p. 87.
3. Desendant of Adam (7th generation). Enoch is also one of the three people in the Bible taken to heaven while still alive. *The Book of Enoch* is a pseudepigraphal work attributed to Enoch and as the Bible says “And Enoch walked with God, and he was not; for God took him.” (Genesis 5:24; see also Heb. 11:5). The Book of Enoch does not form part of the Canon of Scripture. The Hebrew and Arab writers considered Enoch a scientist and ascribed to him the invention of figures and astrology (see *Bibleyskaya entsiklopediya, trud y izdanie Arkhimanderita Nikifora*, Moskva, 1891, p. 239).
4. In the footnotes the year of the publication of Conybeare’s work is not correct (see Tadevos Avdalbekian. *Hayagitakan hetazotyunner*. Yerevan, 1969, p. 208):
5. Ibid, p. 208.
6. *The Key of Truth*. A manual of the Paulicain Church of Armenia. The Armenian text, edited and translated with illustrative documents and introduction by F.C. Conybeare, Oxford, 1898, p. 119.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, p.73.
9. Ibid, p. 72.
10. Ibid, p. 124.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid p. 92:
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid, p. 93.
16. Luke 3, 21, 22.
17. See Odznetsi Hovhannes: *Matenagrutyun*, Venetik, 1833.
18. Ibid, pp. 24 -33.
19. Magistros Grigor. *Girq tghtots*. Alexandropol, 1910, tught 67.
20. Khachatryan P. Grigor Narekatsin yev hay mijnadary. girq arajin, St. Ejmiatsin, 1966, p.99.

21. Gibran Kahlil. *Margaren*. Hajatsuts Garegin arqeps. Gazantcyan, Istanbul, 1992.
22. *Yev yaghages khratoj dzernadrutyanyan*, glukh 22 (see The Armenian text, p. 38).
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid, pp. 117-118.
25. Ibid, pp. 121-122.

ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԵՍ ԵՐԵՑ ԽՆՈՒՍԵՑՈՒ «ԲԱՆԱԼԻ ՃՇՄԱՐՏՈՒԹԵԱՆ» ԵՐԿԻ ԿՈՆԻԲԵՐՅԱՆ ԹԱՐԳՄԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ

Հայոց եկեղեցու պավլիկյան աղանդի պաշտամունքային և ծիսական կարգին է նվիրված 18-րդ դարի հայ հոգևորական Հովհաննես Երեց Խնուսեցու «Բանալի ճշմարտութեան» արժեքավոր երկը՝ գրված 1782թ. Տարոն գավառում: Բնագրի թարգմանիչն ու հրատարակիչը Ֆրեդերիկ Կոնիբերն է, որը, 1891թ-ին աշխատելով Էջմիածնի Ս. Սինոդի գրադարանում, առիթ է ունենում ծանոթանալու այս աշխատությանը, կռահելու նրա կարևորությունը և հրատարակելու ոչ միայն իր կողմից ճշգրտված ու լայնորեն ծանոթագրված բնագիրը գրաբարով, այլև այդ բնագրի անգլերեն թարգմանությունը: Այդ թարգմանությամբ էլ եվրոպական աստվածաբանությանը հայտնի է դառնում պավլիկյան աղանդի վարդապետությունը: