

Three Poems by Frik*

Translated by Fr. Pakrad Bourjekian and Michael E. Stone

Introduction to Frik

*Translated by permission from N. Bogharian, **Armenian Writers**, Jerusalem: Sts. James Press, 1971, 338-340.*

Frik is the first Armenian poet who wrote almost completely in Middle Armenian. The dates of his birth and death are unknown. In some of his lyrics, Frik gives us hints of historical and biographical information, that enable us to set his lifetime approximately between the years 1234 and 1315. In light of the titles of two of his poems, we may assume that Frik was a layman. His name may be derived from the name Frederik; his father's name was Takvorš ah.

Frik's birthplace is unknown, but it is thought that he came from Western Armenia. It seems he received some education, but it is not known where and under what conditions. His writings show that he was literate, and he was familiar with biblical and other religious, ecclesiastical texts. In his works we can discern the influence of Nersēs the Graceful, the very great Armenian religious poet..

Thanks to his natural gifts, Frik became one of the boldest writers of his time. He did not write in the learned Ancient Armenian of his age (grabar), but in the people's common spoken language, so that his writing was comprehensible to all. Frik, the poet, seems to have compiled his works in one volume, which was known as "The Book of Frik".

In his writings, Frik appears as humane, democratic and patriotic poet. He rails strongly against the abuse of the ruling feudal classes. He shows a profound hatred of the wealthy who ruthlessly exploit the hard labor of the poor, whom considers

* These poems are translated from the text prepared by Archbishop Tirayre (Melik Muš kambarean), *Frik, The Divan* (New York: AGBU, 1952).

deserving of Hell. From his sensitive heart, cries frequently burst forth against the violence of the Tatar Khans who had conquered Armenia.

Frik composed a series of social, philosophical poems, but those poems infused with a religious and moral sensibility are much more numerous, as if he were a medieval spiritual leader, reading spiritually beneficial sermons to his flock. This fact may be explained by the general mentality of that age, which in large measure corresponded to the poet's own world-view.

Frik's writings have great artistic value, with their originality, burning and colorful images, and strong, regular rhythm and musicality. Frik was also a singer. His poetry sprang from a pure heart, infused with hope, and for this reason, they speak directly to the reader's heart. In his poems, Frik mostly used the "Armenian meter," that is to say, 2+3+2, 3+2+3, (7+3+5). This has regular rhythm and musicality, and is very apt both for religious-philosophical and for love poems. He also uses poetic lines of syllables in the following measures: 4+4, 3+3+2+3, 4+4+4+4, 3+4+4+4, 5+5+5.

Frik not only wrote his poems, but was a singer as well, and the title of one of his poems is "By the singer Frik." The superscriptions of eight of his poems specify the tune according to which they should be sung. It is very natural that Frik composed his poems as songs and medieval bards sang his poems throughout the Middle Ages. In this fashion, Frik had a deep influence on subsequent Armenian poets, such as Yovhannē s Tlkuranc'i, Mkrtič ' Nał aš , Grigoris Ał t'amarc'i, and others. Justly, Archbishop Tirayre called him "the guide and pioneer of our medieval poets." Frik's poetic opus is an abiding treasure of Armenian literature.¹

¹A compilation of Frik's works was published in Yerevan, in 1941 by M. Mkrian and Y. T'orosian. Archbishop Tirayre published a more comprehensive collection *Friki Divan* in 1952, in New York.

I

Spiritual Benefit² pronounced by the same Frik,

This poem revolves around the theme of water. "I yearn for water," Frik says; the water is the spring of the divine spirit; the water of the baptismal font gives rebirth; the water symbolises eternal life. The poet wishes to drink this water, to bathe in it, to cleanse himself in it. If he is granted a drop of this wondrous water, he will be justified, refreshed, and rejoice. He will be reborn. The poem is permeated by Frik's yearning for union with and participation in the fire of divine love. Like the following two poems, it concludes with the certainty of the repose of redemption.

5 I yearn for the water, I go in hope
to reach that spring, that I may live.³
I drink of that water, and then I am satisfied
if a little time remains so I can bathe in it.
I wash myself in that pool of love;
10 I am made new again, more than the old Adam.⁴
If I have wages — may I become worthy —
you make me know how I can shine.
If I desire the land of the living for myself
when am I far from the laws of God?
15 If I wish to possess the everlasting good,
I forget home and place and brother and sister.⁵
I drown in tears and wash myself,⁶
and I am cleansed of sins and justified.
Then I wear sackcloth, if I wish,
20 when I abandon greatness⁷ and become poor.
I have hope in God, may I become sinless,
when I pass time on the strait and narrow path.
By the light of the holy Cross I remain unafraid,
even if I wish these thousand good things for myself.
25 When you give me power, I become strong,

²Friki Divan, p. 439.

³Cf. John 4:14.

⁴See Poem III, line 40.

⁵Mat. 19:5, Mark 10:29; cf. Gen. 12:1.

⁶See Poem III, line 49.

⁷Or wealth.

so I can live vigorously and be not lethargic.
Look upon me with sweetness, that I may be a child anew,
so I can draw the yoke and come close to you.⁸
In the fearsome Court,⁹ let me not be afraid,
30 when I become worthy of the vision of Jesus.
I desire this thing, that thus I may strive,
that I not remain separate from good companions.
I yearn for that spring,¹⁰ I weep for it,
if one drop reaches me, I am justified.
35 I am a thousand times blessed if I become thus,
that I not remain yearning for the great spring.
You, God, are pitying and very benevolent,
give me to drink of that water,¹¹ that I may be full.
From the springs of your Holy Spirit may I be refreshed,
through the light of your face, may I rejoice.
40 Make me hear that voice, that I come to the right side,
and I will not be afraid of the left.¹²
You promised us good, "I give that life",¹³
I, the slave, have heard that and yearn greatly.¹⁴
45 I tremble all day long and worry about this:
when will this good happen, that one day I may rejoice.
When I am dead through my sins, how shall I shine?¹⁵
The pitiless tester,¹⁶ indeed, has imprisoned me,
He tests me continuously with gold and silver.
50 Like a fool or a drunkard I go round and round,
I was not saying where do I go after death,
or to whom shall I give reckoning and account?
My mind has become insipid and bland,
it does not receive the taste and flavour of books.
55 When you opened my mind, which I still feel,
your love burnt in me, I bubble like fire.
I asked myself,¹⁷ what will happen to me?
who will bring me out of this knot, that I might have surcease?
Lord, make your voice reach me, so that I may have peace,
60 shine light to my darkness, else I will be blind.¹⁸
Pity me, your servant, so that I will not be useless,
You drew me to You, where else shall I turn?
When I remember these jewel words of mine and rejoice,

⁸Mat. 11:29-30.

⁹I.e., of the divine judgement.

¹⁰Rev. 21:6.

¹¹Or, "intoxicate me with that water"; then the poet would be using the familiar image of inspiration as "divine drunkenness": cf. H. Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Antiken Mystik* (BZNW, 9; Gießen: Töpelmann, 1929).; Philo, *de Ebrietate*, 145-147.

¹²Literally: left side, that is the Satanic.

¹³I.e., the future, eternal life. The promise of life is repeated often in the Gospels, and is particularly prominent in John.

¹⁴An error in the line numbering in the edition leaves only four lines between 40 and 45. Frik's self-designation as "slave" or "servant" occurs throughout Poem III.

¹⁵Compare line 13

¹⁶That is, Satan.

¹⁷Literally: spoke with my heart.

¹⁸See Isa. 9:2, 42:16.

(I remember) my terrible sins and I sit down and cry.
65 Like a river I will go around this world,¹⁹
 And I Friik enter the sea²⁰ and float around.
What do I fear of the smiting of the waves,
 When I am diving down in the the midst of the sea?
When someone enquires of me, where am I going,
70 I will give him a fitting reply.
 "If I seek this jewel, so that I might become rich,
 and I might see with my mind's eyes and tremble;
he, who brings it to me so that I might rejoice for a time,
 draws my breath from me, when I approach
75 and receive it for a while in my palm and rejoice,
 And become immortal in soul and body."
I await a firm and unbreakable ship,
 so that I may enter it safely and tremble no more.
The captain is Christ, I will follow Him;
80 I will have no other food for myself than Him.
I will give my head and blood as a payment,
 so that he will bring me to the place which I desire.
I myself will become a sacrifice for Christ,
 so that I might receive my needs²¹ and become a king.
85 Christ is alive and I believe in Him,
 Even if I am worn out in this care²² and very aged.
Let me become wise and intelligent in that,²³
 when I examine and learn deeply.
When I weep a little here, yea there I will rejoice.
90 I will receive honour and glory from the Creator,
so that I might rest straight away and be happy in Him.

¹⁹ Or: land. compare Eccl. 1:7.

²⁰ Friik continues the image from Eccl. 1:7.

²¹ I.e., desires; or else: sufferings, that is a sacrifice for Christ.

²² I.e., the world.

²³ The future world.

II

Again Pronounced by
the Same Frik²⁴

Elegies on that the Moslems arose against the Christians and Cruelly Smote holy Place on account of the Dissention of the Christians

This poem expresses Frik's dismay and profound distress at the suffering of the Armenian people at the hands of Moslem invaders. He characterizes all of the neighbouring Christian nations as wicked, including the Armenians themselves. Because of their evil, God has allowed the Moslem enemies to overcome them. He indicts the church and its clergy as well, but expresses his faith in God and His mercy which He will give to the Armenian people in the end. Like many other expressions of distress at historical suffering, this poem implicitly raises the issue of God's justice as evidenced in the historical fate of the nation.

5. Those who hear this elegy of mine, let them mourn over sins,
I speak persuasive words, where there are men of understanding, let them
give ear.

That people which you know as understanding, also possess²⁵ grave sins,
They have a faith as brilliant as light, but they love darkness.
I shall show the sins of every man; let the ignorant²⁶ scorn me!

10 The crazy and disorderly Franks deny fornication to be sin;
Byzantium is very arrogant; they say that Armenians are Frankish dogs,²⁷
They have one other sinful trap, that it is improper²⁸ to take back their words.
The Russ, a blood-thirsty murderer; they sell their own offspring;²⁹
If I mention the Ossete and the Cherkess, in other things they are like the
Russ;

15 The Georgian is a thief and bandit; they do not recognize judgement and
law;

The Copt, I say, and the Jacobite confess the one nature,
But they have another great sin, that they do not keep the deacon holy;
The Nestorians are evil-doers, and celebrate a worthless Mass.
Lybia and Ethiopia and Grigorē³⁰ are very much apart from this land.³¹

²⁴Friki Divan p. 274

²⁵ Literally: are masters of.

²⁶ Note the theme of knowledge, see lines 6, 7 and 9.

²⁷ Vryonis discussed Byzantine attitudes towards Armenians, but of a somewhat earlier period: Speros Vryonis, "Byzantine Images of Armenians," *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*, ed. Richard G. Hovannissian (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981), 65-81.

²⁸ Literally, they think that it is improper. The next phrase is obscure, perhaps this is an example of their arrogance.

²⁹ Through these lines, the ethnonym is singular, but the verb in the second hemistych is plural.

³⁰ The identification of this place is uncertain.

20. The Indians and Zoroastrians are without compassion; the Moghul sons
pass beyond that.³²

They are not without sins, with violence they cut each other down,

The Armenians, slanderers and abusers, who hate all nations,
all hate one another; for that reason the foreigners trample us
underfoot.

Indeed, the Christians are very sinful, that thus they drag out a long
time;

25 Let it roll on³³ that sinful people who persecute the churches.

Indeed, this happens because they hate each other bitterly.

Hierarchs are avaricious and are very far from the laws,

Those things Christ bought with blood, the bishops sell.

The kings do not reconcile, they bear grudges against one another,

30 They continually gather forces and attack one another with swords.

With threats the bishops go to church and gossip,

They are always full of anger, they plan whom to unfrock.³⁴

They sit on pillows in the church, men at whom the angels tremble,

Then for bribes they dress men in robes of office, or imprison them.

35 When the shepherds have gone astray, how will they gather the scattered
sheep?

The priests are jealous, they hate foreign priests.

When they come forward to read the book,³⁵ they speak like the angels,

They know Canons and laws, and they possess no holiness.

Monastics and solitaries and ascetics are religious,

40 But Satan deceives them, who wander greatly (and) stray.

Satan rejoices at that, that Christians hold a grudge,

If the Armenians were not deceitful, why did they poison lord Nerses?³⁶

The people are adulterous and shameless, they oppose the priests,

The deceitful nation of the Armenians do not agree with the eleven.³⁷

45 They are imperfect and lazy; they have no mercy at all,

Wicked and lawless, they do not bend their knee to the ground.

Indeed, by that the wolves are strengthened, they prey on the innocent
lambs.

Because of that they perish quickly; empty, one by one, they curse
their day.

What obstacle is there, that they do not confess one faith?

50 The faith of the assemblies of God, the lawgivers scatter,³⁸

The code of the former men, these latter men destroy.

Kings and hierarchs anger God doubly,

³¹Or, world.

³²The line is unclear. We have read "and" with the apparatus. In the second hemistich the variant
ձի՞ՕԱ is found, which would yield "transgress the law".

³³I.e., happen to.

³⁴Which priests to expell from their orders.

³⁵the sacred book.

³⁶This is a reference to the poisoning of Nerses the Great by king Pap.

³⁷I.e., apostles.

³⁸This line has a antinomy between the base meaning Է՞Օ (gather, assemble), which may also mean
"council" (i.e. of the church) and Ափ՞ժ%Օ basically "to scatter" or here "to destroy". The variant
reading is "gathered by God".

When they are not reconciled with one another, by what will they
reconcile God?³⁹

When Christians do not observe the divine commandments,
55 Not for love or for fear, who reproach through faith,
How will God be pleased with us, or not allow those who persecute?⁴⁰
Love is the head of all faith, they are separate from it, they do not go towards
Him,

The Lord God will turn this bitterness to sweetness.

Many bear sins and evil and licentious promiscuity,
60 The fast is not acceptable nor whatever prayers they say.

Whatever sacrifice Christians offer is not pleasing,
Those who disobey the laws do whatever sins exist.

God gave us into the hands the lawless who will cut us down,
Whatever sins Satan sows, the Tajiks do them all.

65 But truly they are very crafty, that they are eager for prayers,
Our Lord is angry because they are ingrates;
Because of us he took on a body, so that we might become a place of
rest.⁴¹

He says, when you are not important to me, I rose up, abandoned (you), so
that they might take you captive.

Then, what tribe went forth against the enemy and how do they
conquer?⁴²

70 Will the Lord be merciful, for we are the price of the blood of the Creator?
He arrives from on high to us, to aid and help us.

He does not leave orphan and captive, he does not withhold mercy,
He does not act from our sins,⁴³ he does not bear a grudge for ever.

This bitterness which we have, he turns into sweetness.⁴⁴

75. He raises up for us a holy king who does justice,
He exacts vengeance from enemies, who dig holes for the Christians,⁴⁵

Destroy our ravager! Arise, horn of our salvation!

Help this Christian people! we call You in our tribulation.

Frik pronounces elegies weeping, he seeks forgiveness of his sins.

80 We beg of You, Lord and God, rest for the Christians.

Give not trembling to our souls, nor shattering to our faith!

Make us firm through hope and true faith.

Blessed is the Father, blessed the Son, blessed the Spirit, always for ever.

Bless all Christians and peoples who listen!

³⁹ Note the earlier reference to conflicts between kings (line 29, above).

⁴⁰ Scil. "us to do so."

⁴¹ It seems that the meaning is "so that we might have a place of rest"; cf. line 80.

⁴² I.e., because the Christians are not faithful to God, he allows them to be overcome by their enemies.

⁴³ His action is not determined by our sins.

⁴⁴ See line 58.

⁴⁵ To fall into.

III

A Good Word
pronounced
by the Same Frik⁴⁶

This poem expresses a different modality of Frik's religious sensibility. The preceding poem was focused around a national theme. This poem, perhaps in part stimulated by the same events, is a song of the evanescence of worldly glory and of God's mercy to the sinner. It is permeated by Frik's sense of his sinfulness and his certainty of divine forgiveness and redemption.

5 Greatly have I twisted a man's beard,⁴⁷
The burden came upon me, the slave,
Greatly have I gloried in my gold.

(Even if) I am arrayed, I wear shag and fur,
(Even if) my brocade and garment are splendid,
10 (Even if) I set a jewel as a crown upon my head,
(Even if) I make a spacious desirable palace,
(Even if) I build⁴⁸ a village and field to my church,
(Even if I have) many slaves, Kipchaks and Russ,
(Even if) I gather good things in the house and outside,
15 (Even if) I am ruler of my people,
What will death do to me, a son of Adam?
Or when I flee to the hope of the good.

This false life gave me disappointment;
It helped in my deception,
It caused my body to forget death.
20 It wished to deprive me of my soul,
And to make fun of my mortality.
When I discerned between the bad and the good,
I became disappointed with this world.
It is not necessary here to give honour,
25 Daughter and son help not me their father,
There is no greatness at the hour of my death.

I make a start of praying,
Through the toil of my striving,
The Lord has mercy on me the sinner.
30 He brings (me) from darkness to light,
And he affects my soul.

⁴⁶Friki Divan p. 329.

⁴⁷This means, I despised a man greatly.

⁴⁸That is, donate.

This light was given to me by God,
 Be not amazed at these things.
He who has hope in the Lord,
 35 Will not be deprived of this desired thing.
To my mind he gave a luminous lamp,
 Which became a guide for me, the blind.
O, my brother, light for my eyes
 is whatever you say about my soul.
I know that this is not from me, from the earth,⁴⁹
40 He gave the gift of the spirit to me, the old.⁵⁰
God had mercy on me the sinner,
 God awoke me from my truly deep sleep,
He opened then⁵¹ the ear of my soul,
45 So that I can look at the light.
Whatever deceit or crookedness is in my tongue,
 I leave behind, I will become like a virgin.
I make tears well up in my eyes,
 And I wash the dirt of my soul.⁵²
50 I am freed of this dirty filth,
 and this illusory, false life.

When a demand comes for me, the slave,
 My soul is separated from my body.
I go forth outside (it) joyfully,
 55 And I am freed from this hunter (i.e., of souls).⁵³
Like the dove I take wing,
 I find places,⁵⁴ rest and light.
If I want these for my soul,
 Whatever desire there is, takes flight.
60 Whatever affliction there is for me, the slave,
 I leave it all, I go forth to light.
When the Lord comes, judge of my soul,
 He will find it wakeful and my torch for light.⁵⁵
If I do not reach this mystery,
65 Gloom and darkness overcome me.

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy,
On sinful me, on Frik.

⁴⁹Or, "through me", "through the earth": these are synonyms since man is made earth (ü · £), see Gen. 2:7, 3:19.

⁵⁰The old Adam, man before redemption, cf. Poem I, line 10.

⁵¹The text is a little difficult here, but it may mean "to things that had happened before".

⁵²I.e., with the tears. See Poem I, line 17.

⁵³That is, Satan.

⁵⁴See poem 2, line 67.

⁵⁵A reference to the parable of the ten virgins.