## A NOTE THE TRANSLATION OF THE TRISAGION

The hymn "Holy God, holy Strong, holy Immortal, have mercy on us" has formed a regular part of the Byzantine Liturgy since the fifth century. It also occurs, in Greek, in the Coptic eucharistic rite and in the Roman rite as part of the *Improperia* for Good Friday, in both Latin and Greek. The translation "Holy God, holy and strong, holy and immortal, have mercy on us", is found in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, which, however, states that "at Jerusalem, Constantinople, and in the West. the Trisagion was taken to be addressed to the Trinity". In the non-Chalcedonian Churches the hymn is understood as being addressed to Christ, with the addition of "crucified for us" in the final phrase<sup>1</sup>. The account of the controversy this caused in Constantinople in the early sixth century is described in one of Gibbon's finest diatribes.<sup>2</sup>

The translation with the addition of "and" is neither Trinitarian nor Christological, but "Patrological", since in Christian English the word "God", unless qualified, normally denotes the Father. This may, of course, in the words of Gibbon, "be justified by the rules of theology", but is not in accordance with tradition in either East or West for one and a half millennia. The first English translator to add "and" seems to have been John Mason Neale in 1859 and this addition has been accepted by the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox diocese of Sourozh.<sup>3</sup>

How should the Trisagion be translated? In the first place the Greek nominatives are in effect vocative. This is quite standard in late Greek<sup>4</sup>, and the Slavonic renders these correctly by vocatives. This was understood by the earliest English translators, both Anglicans, Dr John Covel, in 1722, and Dr John King, in 1772, whose versions are respectively, "Holy God, Holy, (*Thou that art*) Immortal, have mercy upon us", and "O Holy God, O Holy Mighty, O Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us".

Next we should look for the possible sources of the text. John Covel and Edward Gibbon both recount the pious legend, found in St John of Damascus, of the boy who was snatched up into heaven and given the Trisagion by the Angels when St Proclus was Archbishop of Constantinople. St John tells the story twice, in the *De Fide Orthodoxa* and in his letter on the Trisagion to Archimandrite Jordanes. In both texts he also gives his view on the sources of the words of the hymn. In the *De Fide Orthodoxa* he naturally associates the triple "Holy" with the vision of Isaias, following St Athanasios and St Basil the Great; in the letter he finds the source of the epithets "Strong" and "Immortal" in Psalm 41(42):1-3, "My soul longs for you, O God. My soul has thirsted for God, the strong, the living". This is not what the Hebrew has. This reads, "My soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The present Coptic liturgy varies this addition in accordance with the season, adding at Easter, for example, "risen from the dead".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* chapter 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> It is also found in the translation of St John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, first published in 1889.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See the discussion in Moulton's Grammar of New Testament Greek, vol. 3, page 34s.

living God". Nor is it the reading of modern critical editions of the LXX, which have "My soul longs for you, O God. My soul has thirsted for the living God". It is however the reading of Lucian's edition and of the fifth century codex Alexandrinus and it is the official text not only of the Eastern Orthodox Churches but also of the Latin Church, being found in the Vulgate, and hence, in English, in the Reims-Douai version. The critical edition of Rahlfs, somewhat misleadingly, says that this corresponds to the Hebrew. The explanation is that in a number of places, in particular in Job, the LXX translates the Hebrew el, "God", as opposed to elohim, also "God", by "the Strong [One]". This is not so odd as it might seem, since etymologically the word *el* in Hebrew is connected with the idea of "strength". We find "strong" as an epithet of God in Deut. 10:17, 2 Reigns [2 Samuel] 22:32, 22:48, Neh. 1:5, 9:31.32, 2 Macc. 1:24, Psalm 7:12, Sir 15:18, Jer. 27:4, 39:18, Dan. 9:4. As a title of God the word is used in 2 Reigns [2 Samuel] 22:31, 22:33, and in Job 22:13, 33:29, 34:21, 36:22, 36:26, 37:5, 37:10. In all these passages the LXX translates "God" [Hebr. "El"] by "Strong".

St John explains the verses of the psalm as follows, "In saying 'My soul longs for you, O God' he [David] signified the one Godhead. Then by saying 'My soul has thirsted for God, the strong, the living' he demonstrated the triplicity of the hypostases'".

This explanation is taken up by St Nicholas Cabasilas in his commentary on the divine Liturgy, who adds that it was Church which combined the triple "Holy" of Isaias with Psalm 41 and added "have mercy on us". St Nicholas may allude to the legend of the boy when he writes, "this hymn was transmitted to us from the Angels", but he does not lay any stress on it.

In Orthodox tradition the Trisagion, then, is explicitly Trinitarian: "God" refers to the Father, "Strong" to the Son and "Immortal" to the holy Spirit. In his letter to Jordanes St John develops this Trinitarian understanding of the hymn, "'Holy God', the Father, 'Holy Strong', the Son, incarnate, crucified in the flesh and risen, 'Holy Immortal', the holy Spirit".

This is also made clear in a number of liturgical texts, for example the Vespers Doxastikon for Pentecost by the Emperor Leo,

Come, you peoples, let us worship the Godhead in three persons, the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit; for the Father timelessly begot the Son, co-eternal and co-reigning, and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son; one power, one essence, one Godhead, whom we all worship as we say: Holy God, who created all things through the Son, with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. Holy Strong, through whom we have come to know the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world. Holy Immortal, the Advocate Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. Holy Trinity, glory to you.

Finally, "strong" conveys the force of the Greek *ischyros* better than "mighty", which is better kept for *krataios*, so echoing the frequent translation "Almighty" for *Pantokrator*.