



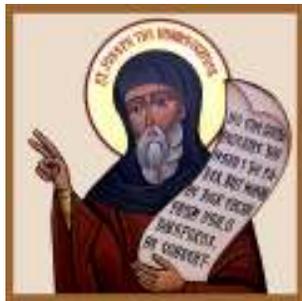
Stars of the Morning, So Gloriously Bright

Text: Joseph the Hymnographer (816-883)

Tune: Plain-song melody, c. 1650

In Luther’s Morning and Evening prayers, he has us pray that God’s “holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me.” This is a fitting prayer, recognizing that God does indeed send His angels to watch over us, to fight the forces of evil on our behalf, and to keep us in His loving care. “Stars of the Morning, So Gloriously Bright” is a hymn that instructs us regarding the work and ministry of the angels of God. This glorious ministry is a gift of God, one for which we give greatest thanks.

This hymn illustrates the historicity of our hymnody. It was written by Joseph the Hymnographer, a ninth century saint who is credited with writing about 1,000 hymns.



An icon of Joseph the Hymnographer.

He was born in Sicily in 816, the son of Plotinus and Agatha, who were pious Christians. In 830, he and his family moved to Greece to escape the Arab invasion of Sicily. As a result of his Christian upbringing, Joseph became a monk at the monastery of Latmos. Recognized for his piety and love of God, a man named Gregory took Joseph to Constantinople. While there, Joseph

helped Gregory defend the use of icons and other artwork in the teaching of the faith. The emperor, Leo the Armenian, was an iconoclast, one who opposed the use of sacred images and sought to destroy them. In this debate between the Church and emperor, Leo was chosen by the monks of Constantinople to go to Pope Leo III (the Eastern and Western churches were still in fellowship at this time) to obtain his assistance. However, while Joseph journeyed to Rome, he was attacked by a band of Arabs and turned over to the

iconoclast government. He was imprisoned for six years. However, during those years he inspired others to stand strong in their fight, and often used Christian song to inspire and teach. After being freed, Joseph founded another monastery in Constantinople, dedicated to the honor of Gregory, who first brought him there. He also founded a church, named after the Apostle Bartholomew. Joseph’s first written (and surviving) hymn was written to honor Bartholomew. However, Joseph’s hymn writing soon flourished, and he wrote hymns on several topics. He continued to be a defender of the faith until illness prevented him from further work. When he knew his death was near, he prayed fervently for peace and unity in the Church. He died in the Lord in 883.

The version of Joseph’s hymn which we have is not as much a translation as it is a paraphrase. The Rev. John Mason Neale, a prolific translator of early Greek and Latin hymnody, was more inclined to give the essence of these historic texts rather than a word-for-word translation. Neale originally translated this Joseph’s work as a five stanza hymn. ❧ *e Lutheran Hymnal* omitted stanza three, which reads:

These keep the guard amid Salem’s dear bowers,
Thrones, principalities, virtues, and powers,
Where, with the living ones, mystical four,
Cherubim, seraphim, bow and adore.

This omitted stanza captures the imagery of Revelation chapters 4 and 5, which give us a glimpse into heavenly worship.

“Stars of the Morning, So Gloriously Bright” begins as a catechetical hymn. It teaches the place of the angels, that they are those who dwell in heaven and sing praise to the Holy Trinity. But these angels do not always remain in heaven. Stanza two teaches that these ministers of God are sent as His messengers, the “help of the helpless ones.” This helps to capture the idea of the guardian angels, those angels whom God sends to defend us in the raging war between good and evil. Though these angels fight to defend us, they also are part of God’s invisible creation, part of what God created in His “six days’ employ.” For this gift, we, the sons of God, shout for joy. Finally, the hymn closes with a prayer. We pray that these angels would still comfort us and fight with and for us, until that day when we join them “where their anthems they ceaselessly pour” and we with them “bow and adore” our triune God.