


The “Thrice-Holy”: An Angelic Liturgical Formula in Jewish and Christian Traditions

- ▼ **ABSTRACT** In an Armenian parabiblical text dealing with events that traditionally took place from the Fall of the Angels before the Creation, and down to Moses and the Exodus (“*Questionnaire*”), one passage quotes Isa 6:3b as the praise pronounced by the Seraphs, the second of the nine angelic classes. The present article traces aspects of the varied development of this Isaianic formula in Armenian and other Christian traditions as well as in Jewish sources, up until its appearance in *Questionnaire*. This review reveals a complex interweaving of ideas about the celestial liturgy, angelology, numerology, and human liturgy, which have all been associated with the Isaianic formula. The ramifications of this biblical expression of unclear origin have immense implications.
- ▼ **KEYWORDS** Seraphs, Trishagion, Isaiah 6:3, angelic liturgy, celestial hierarchy, angels, *Sanctus* prayer.
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1. Introduction

The passage which we will discuss here occurs in an unpublished Armenian parabiblical work that has been dubbed *Questionnaire*, which is preserved in the Mash-tots Matenadaran, manuscript M682, fol. 7r (1679 CE). Its full title is: Հարցումն կարճատօս ընտրեալ եւ հաւաքեալ ի գրոց [Short Questionnaire, Selected and Assembled from Books]. This work, which I am currently preparing for full publication, deals with events and traditions that took place from the Fall of the Angels before the Creation down to Moses and the Exodus. The first part of the manuscript presents, among other matters, details of the hierarchical ranks of the angels, enumerating and naming nine descending classes of angels. These details are embedded in lists of celestial beings that commence from the Thrones, the angels closest to God, down to the lowest class that interfaces with the human world that are called simply Angels.

Michael E. Stone  0000-0001-6352-0431 • Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel (Email: stone.michael.e@me.com)

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Questionnaire associates a biblical verse with each class. That verse constitutes the particular praise of God that the specific class offered. The list of nine angelic classes ultimately follows the listing of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, familiar from his work *Celestial Hierarchy*.¹ This passage has been published previously, based on another copy, a Miscellany, M286 (16th century), fol. 312r (Stone 2016, 77–81).² Here we publish the passage from M682 (described in *Mayr ts'uts'ak* 2007, 309–316).³ The passage transmits the verse in Isa 6:3, the praise of God pronounced by the Seraphs before the divine throne. That verse had a rich and varied development in Judaism and in Christian traditions from earliest days. We will present some aspects of its usage in the Armenian and other Christian traditions and in earlier Jewish sources.

2. The Formula “Thrice Holy” in Different Traditions

In Part 1 of *Questionnaire*, in section 1.3 we read:

1.3. Երկրորդ՝ Սերափերք եւ սսեն. սուրբ սուրբ սուրբ Տէր զօրութեանց:

“The second (i.e., class of angels), Seraphs⁴, and they say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts’”.

The doxology⁵ cited is a quotation of Isa 6:3b, shortened by the scribe to fit into one line, according to his practice in this manuscript. However, in M268 the verse of praise pronounced by the Seraphs is given in full as:

Սուրբ, սուրբ, սուրբ Տէր զօրութեանց. յի են երկինք եւ երկիր փառօք քո:

“Holy, Holy, Holy is⁶ the Lord of Hosts, the heaven and the earth are full of your Glory”.⁷

Many sources describe the angelic, heavenly praise as being the angels’ singing of that particular verse. After all, the prophet Isaiah says that the Seraphic choirs sang these words to one another in the Divine Court (Isa 6:3), so what better information could be adduced as to the content of angelic praise than Isaiah’s prophetic citation of it? The threefold repetition of the word “holy” (ἅγιος) gained this verse the name

1 As is noted in Stone 2016, 77. The list included in Grigor Tat’ewats’i 1993, 144, might have been intermediary between the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and our text.

2 The passage being discussed occurs on page 78 of that volume.

3 *Questionnaire* is listed on pp. 309–310. Another copy of the list, but in ascending order, is found in M537 of the year 1673, fols. 231r–232r. Neither text has been published in full.

4 On the Seraphs see: Wegner 2006. They are mentioned in the Bible only in Isa 6:2, 6. See also Hartenstein 2007 for the religio-historical background of Cherubs and Seraphs.

5 Gruenwald 2014, 78–79 perceptively remarks concerning re-applications of this verse, that “the biblical opening phrases are, as it were, the doxological constant, while the main body of the doxology is more or less in the form of a free variation on the biblical *Vorlage*”. The accuracy of this statement will become evident in the course of the present article.

6 Or: “are you”. In fact this clause is a predicative without any explicit verb.

7 This variation on Isa 6 is not biblical and it might have lain behind the form in M682 as well.

Trishagion or “Thrice Holy”.⁸ Whence Isaiah took the concept and the specific text of this praise is unknown, but the idea of prayer to and praise of God by the heavenly beings is older than Isaiah, though the exact words of such praise are not explicitly detailed anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Praise as the ceaseless activity of the angels is well known in Armenian texts (Stone 2016, 97, 104).

Examples of praise by the created beings are, of course, already to be found in the Hebrew Bible in texts like Ps 89 (88):6–8 and Ps 29 (28):1–2 and in other similar instances.

The three-fold glorification as a celestial song of praise was taken up and re-formulated in Rev 4:8 and there it became: ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ, ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος – “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,⁹ who was and is and is to come!” The Armenian text of the same verse of Revelation reads: Սուրբ Սուրբ Սուրբ, Սուրբ Սուրբ Սուրբ, Սուրբ Սուրբ Սուրբ, Տէր Աստուած Ամենալիւ, որ էն էւ է՛ս, էւ որ գալո՛ց էս – “Holy Holy Holy, Holy Holy Holy, Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty, who is and are and who is coming”.¹⁰ Thus, the text in Zohrabeian’s Bible (1805) has the “thrice holy” praise thrice, reading սուրբ (“holy”) nine times in all. The other known, ancient, Armenian translation of Revelation, edited by Frédéric Murad, reads: սուրբ, սուրբ, սուրբ Տէր Աստուած Ամենալիւ, որ էն էւ էն, էւ գալոց է: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who is and is and is coming”. Here սուրբ occurs three times, as in the Greek text.

The striking, nine-fold repetition of սուրբ (“holy”) in the Zohrabeian Bible where Murad’s text has it three times, as does the Greek of Revelation, is probably to be explained as three times Thrice-holy, making nine in all. The number nine of the angelic classes, descending from Thrones to angels, is already found in the *Celestial Hierarchy* 200C–261D (Luibheid and Rorem 1987). There, Pseudo-Dionysius expounds the nine classes, their names and character, and their descending order. A modern Armenian translation of Pseudo-Dionysius was published a decade ago (Ghazaryan 2013), and there is an edition of the old texts with an English translation (Thomson 1987).

⁸ The name *Trishagion* is derived from Greek τρίς (“threefold”) and ἅγιος (“holy”). However, the title *Trishagion* usually designates a specific hymn in the Orthodox Synaxis. To avoid confusion, therefore, I refer to the proclamation as it is in Isa 6:3 by the name “Thrice-Holy”. It was early taken into Christian liturgical use and adapted and embellished. A rich study of an instance of this Christian re-use may be found in Martínez 1999, 120. Moreover, Beck 2011 deals with the “Trishagion Hymn” as it developed in the usage of the Greek Orthodox Church. See further Golitzin 2001, 136. On the *Trishagion*, its versions, their diverse interpretations and liturgical usages (Trinitarian and Christological), and about the polemics over them in ecclesiastical traditions, see also Janeras 1967; Klum-Böhmer 1979, 60–69; Brock 1985; Plank 1992. This verse of Isaiah also constitutes the angelic praise according to §2 of the Armenian text called *History of the Discourse* (Stone 2016, 104).

⁹ In the Greek Bible, the Hebrew divine epithet *šēba’ot* “of hosts” is often translated as τῶν δυνάμεων (“of the powers, armies”) or παντοκράτωρ (“ruler of all, Almighty”). This is, in turn, translated Ամենալիւ (“Almighty”) in Armenian. In the instance in Isa 6:3, however, Greek has, not unusually, a third rendering, the transliteration σαβαωθ, while in Rev 4:8 we find ὁ παντοκράτωρ. Probably, the Greek text of Isa 6:3 that stood before Revelation contained a variant reading.

¹⁰ The relevant verse is to be found on p. 828. The second էն, which is found in Murad’s text where Zohrabeian reads էս (“you are”) may be taken as “He who is”, that is է with the substantivizing article. Note the shift from 2nd person to 3rd person.

The view that the number nine had special numerological significance and was, indeed, a “perfect number”, was widespread in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹¹ Luibheid and Rorem state, concerning Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, that “Dionysius illustrated in his own way the Platonic and Neoplatonic pattern of the three classes, three functions, and three levels. In his eyes, indeed, all reality is hierarchic and triadic. . . . Thus, the angelic universe includes three triads, each subdivided into three orders. . . .” (Luibheid and Rorem 1987, 5). Annemarie Schimmel remarks that “this [the idea about 9] is found in mediaeval Christian exegesis, . . . The nine orders of angels found in such exegesis (and in Dante) are interpreted as reflections of the perfect 3, which can be completed by the all-embracing divine Unity to form the perfect 10” (Schimmel 1993, 164).¹²

Ten was also regarded as a significant number, and the notion of ten as a completion of a list of nine is doubtless behind some mediaeval Armenian texts that count humans as a tenth class, complementing the usual nine angelic classes with a final category of humans. This idea is to be seen in the writings of Ignatius *vardapet* (12th century) who speaks of nine ranks of angels and one of humans (Stone 2013, 94). In the 13th century, Vardan Arewelts’i says, զի թուեցաւ մարդն յինն դասս հրեշտակացն տասներորդի – “For humans are reckoned a tenth class [added] to the nine classes of angels” (manuscript M1267, fol. 5r) and Mkhit’ar Ayrivanets’i (14th century) speaks of ten classes of angels (Stone 2013, 137, 160).¹³

The “Thrice Holy” proclamation occurs in Rev 4:8, in a passage features of which are adapted from Ezekiel 1. In the said passage, the four Living Creatures that sing the “Thrice-Holy” as praise in heaven are drawn from Ezek 1:5–21, 24, and they play the role of the Seraphs of Isa 6.¹⁴ According to 1 *Enoch* 39:12, “those who sleep not” (that is, the Watchers, a very elevated angelic class) praise God saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Spirits, he fills the earth with spirits”. Johann Maier argued that the use of the “Thrice-Holy” formula in this very early Enoch writing outside the Bible, but its rareness in the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, reflects a change in which an originally arcane tradition came into broader use after 70 CE (Maier 1990, 543–586).¹⁵ In the

11 This was partly because the sum of the digits of the multiples of nine always add up to nine.

12 Giving some Homeric examples, Schimmel notes that the ancient view, current in the Graeco-Roman world, was that of the “near-perfection of the 9”. Note, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.986a and compare also the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, 52–62. For a somewhat later view, see “On the Ennead” in Waterfield 1988, 105–107. There is an interesting discussion of the numbers nine and ten in Aṙak’el Siwnets’i, *Adamgirk’* 1.10.12–20: see Stone 2007, 141–142. That is a later source, Aṙak’el Siwnets’i having written his epic on Adam and Eve in 1401–1403. Such symbolism in medieval Armenian writers is discussed in Thomson 1976.

13 In another, much earlier, tradition, ten classes of angels are recorded (2 *Enoch* 29:2), but no connection with nine is evident.

14 These Living Creatures produced sound, see Ezek 1:2, 24, 10:5. There are a number of similar adaptations of the “Thrice-Holy” in the early Christian centuries, of which the *Sanctus* prayer is one. Martinez 1999, 8 fn. 20 discusses the praise of the angelic ranks. On the praises in Revelation chapters 4–5, see Frey 2018, 103–127, and particularly 124–126. Lucetta Mowry has suggested a Jewish liturgical background combined with eastern court practice that served to provide the context for Rev 4–5 (see Mowry 1952, 75–84).

15 Maier’s article is further discussed by Warren 1994. The main point of Warren’s article is to identify an embedded use of the Thrice Holy formula in the scroll 4QSam^a 2:1–11, that had first been discerned in the Septuagint in

form with "heaven and earth", the same verse is the praise of the Seraphs and Cherubs that surround God's throne according to *2 Enoch* 21:1.¹⁶ The invocation "Holy, holy, holy", is also to be found in *Para. Ier.* 9:3 (Stone 2021, 20, 32, 47).

Analogously, the Hebrew tradition integrated the seraphic praise of Isa 6:3 into the heavenly liturgy, itself paralleled in human prayer. This process resembled *mutatis mutandis* the development in early Christian texts that ultimately led to the Thrice Holy being the typical praise of the class of Seraphs in the list in *Questionnaire*. Its interest for the present investigation lies in this similarity which we shall trace briefly.

In Hebrew, the "Thrice-Holy" is called the *Qeduša* "holiness" and it occurs regularly in the Jewish daily liturgy. At its heart stands the Seraphs' praise in Isa 6:3 together with text based upon Ezek 3:12, which latter verse reports the song of the Cherubs before God: "Blessed be the glory of God from his place". The *Qeduša* was established in the Jewish fixed liturgy from early times, and it came to highlight the complementarity of the human recital of these two verses with angelic prayer (Heinemann 1977, 24, 36; Gruenwald 2014, 208–09).¹⁷ So, in the usual Ashkenazi rite, the *Qeduša* opens with the invocation, "Let us extoll you and sanctify you, according to the counsel of discourse of the holy Seraphs, who sanctify your name in holiness, as was written by your prophets, 'and they called to one another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy ...'" (Martinez 1999, 6).¹⁸ The earthly worship here deliberately both resembles and evokes the angelic.

¹ *Clement* 34, dating from the early 2nd century CE, refers to the angelic praise and quotes the Isaianic verse, with substitution of "creation" for "earth".¹⁹ The *Apotelesmata of Apollonius of Tyana*, which is another recension of the *Horarium* found in the *Testament of Adam*,²⁰ mentions the "Trishagion of the angels", that is the "Thrice-Holy" which it says that the angels sang in the second hour of the day (Stone 1982, 72).²¹ The details of the angelic "Thrice-Holy" prayer are given in *Hebrew Enoch* (also known as *Hekalot Rabbati*).²²

The "Thrice Holy" occurs in the list similar to the present one, which Grigor Tat'ewats'i (1346–1409/10) included in the *Book of Questions* referred to briefly in

Thackeray 1914. Warren argues on p. 284 that Maier's dating of the introduction of the Thrice-Holy formula into general usage was too late and it happened rather earlier than 70 CE.

¹⁶ This is the form of the text translated by Andersen 1983, 134.

¹⁷ Gruenwald deals with the connection of the liturgical *Qeduša* (Thrice-Holy) and the early, first-millennium Jewish mystical Hekalot hymns. See further the description of the heavenly *Qeduša* on his p. 293.

¹⁸ The *Qeduša* is referred to in *t Berakot* 1:11. Scholem 1954 remarks that the angelic hymns in the Merkabah mystical text *Hekalot Rabbati* all end in the Isaianic "Thrice Holy". These hymns are claimed to be the oldest part of the Hekalot literature and can be dated at the earliest to the early Byzantine period. On p. 68, Scholem discusses the mystical effect of the repeated Thrice Holy from the point of view of ecstatic religious experience.

¹⁹ And not "heaven and earth", as is discussed in the next paragraph. Martinez 1999, 8 refers to the praise of the angelic ranks.

²⁰ This work is probably of the fourth century CE. On it, see Robinson 1982 and Robinson 1989.

²¹ The Christian text conventionally called "Pseudo-Epiphanius" has also been read as reflecting a heavenly liturgy. It is discussed in Dorfmann-Lazarev 2020.

²² Odeberg 1928 lists several instances such as on pp. 56 ("time ... for the saying of the 'Thrice-Holy'"), 71, and 116 ("those who utter 'Holy' and those who utter 'Blessed'"). Other cases are listed in his index, s.v. שׁוֹרֵק. See also Charlesworth 1983, 1.291–292 and 305.

footnote 1. That list says: “The seventh [class], of the Cherubs: and they say, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts,’ just as Isaiah heard” (Grigor Tat’ewats’i 1993, 144).²³ The Cherubs are the seventh of the nine angelic classes ascending from the lowest, above them are Seraphs and Thrones, which are the closest to the Divinity. Grigor Tat’ewats’i’s list of the angelic ranks in his *Book of Questions* is very like those being published here, but is in ascending order from Angels (lowest) to Thrones (highest). The difference of order may be that of the point of view of the author. The ascending order is that in which the classes are revealed to a seer ascending to the heavens; the descending order, that which the angels encounter as they descend to carry divine messages down to earth or to intervene among humans. Both directions are explicit in Gen 29:12, in the vision of Jacob’s ladder, where the angels’ “ascending” precedes their “descending”.

In documents both earlier and later than *Questionnaire*, seven steps of ascent of souls to the heavens are described.²⁴ This idea is connected with the notion that the earth is surrounded by seven spheres counting from the moon up, and in each of which there is a luminary,²⁵ that is the moon, the sun, or one of the five planets. Beyond the seventh sphere is that of the fixed stars.

3. Conclusions

In most Armenian texts dealing with angelic praise and deriving from Isa 6:3,²⁶ the laudation reads as follows: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. The heavens and earth are full of your glory”.²⁷ This variant form of the “Thrice-Holy”, with addition of the words “and earth”, is also found in the *Sanctus* Prayer in the Liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Nersoyan 1984, 66–67). It is also attributed to angelic choirs in 2 *Enoch* [J] 21:2.²⁸ It may be assumed plausibly that this form of

23 One would expect “Seraphs” since in Isaiah 6 the Seraphs are explicitly said to be those who sing this particular laudation.

24 See on the seven steps of the ascent of the righteous souls and the seven steps of the descent of the wicked in 4 *Ezra* 7:80–98 and the discussion in Stone 1990, 243. Compare also *Questions of Ezra* A 19–21 and *Questions of St. Gregory* recension 1. In the latter work, there is a partial list of seven steps in §§24–29 and another complete one in §§42–48 (see Stone 1995; Stone 2018; Stone 1982, and Stone 2022).

25 Lewy 1956, 412–420 discusses the idea of the ascent and descent of the soul through the seven heavenly spheres. The number seven of the spheres is constituted of six for the planets, sun and moon, and one for the fixed stars. On the development of this cosmology, see Bietenhard 1951, index s.v. *Himmel*, and Edward 2000, 100–108.

26 An early Armenian reference to angelic praise of God is in Agathangelos §272, and see Thomson 2001, 79. Agathangelos says that the angels were created with the purpose of offering unceasing praise to the Creator, as noted above.

27 See M268, fol. 312r, published in Stone 2016, 78–80, and M266, fols. 90v–91r, published in the same work on pp. 81–82. A quite different composition, also preserved in M682, mentions the “Thrice-Holy” as sung by the highest class of angels, but does not quote the second half of the verse: Stone 2016, 102–04. The formula is also found in this form in the Greek Trishagion text published by Martinez 1999, 7.

28 Although 2 *Enoch* is accepted as a Jewish work, it would be difficult to infer from this fact that the particular form of the “Thrice-Holy” found in the surviving Slavonic text of the book is, therefore, Jewish. The addition to a biblical quotation of two words from a formula found in the liturgy is quite possible in the course of two translation procedures, from Semitic into Greek or from Greek into Slavonic, or in the course of copying in

the “Thrice-Holy” also occurred in the *Vorlage* of M682 here, and it was apocoped, though of course, the fragment of the formula preserved does not permit a decisive conclusion.

The investigation of the use of Isa 6:3 in M682, a late manuscript, leads us to perceive very early uses and understandings of the verse Isa 6:3. Thence, it leads us into a complex intersection of ideas about cosmology, the celestial liturgy, angelology, numerology, and human liturgy. It is a nice example of the mobility, reinterpretation and re-utilization of biblical expressions, and their many-faceted diversity of meanings and applications.

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Greek or in Slavonic, or during the process of transmission and editing of the Slavonic that resulted in the two Old Church Slavonic recensions of 2 *Enoch* preserved in the surviving manuscripts. On the transmission of this work, see Andersen 1983, especially 92–94. For a study of the *Sanctus* and its manifold reverberations, see Winkler 2002.

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