

The Praise of the Theotokos for St. John of Damascus' Hymns

Excerpt from *The Life of St. John of Damascus* found in Vol. 94 of Migne's *Patrologia Græca*

English translation courtesy of Bernard Brandt

St. John had retired from his government position with the Muslim ruler of Damascus, and had taken up monastic vows at St. Sabbas in Jerusalem. His abbot had reluctantly granted him permission to do so, but on the condition that he would not be given any special favors, and that he would not make use of his (superlative) education while in the monastery.

But while there, St. John found that a monk was grieving inconsolably, after the death of a fellow monk. The grieving monk asked John to compose a hymn for the late monk, and the saint's compassion won out over his monastic obedience. That hymn has since become a part of the Funeral Service, which St. John also wrote later.

The abbot, however, overheard the hymn as it was being sung, and enraged at the saint's 'disobedience', expelled John from the monastery. After much pleading from the other monks, John was re-admitted into the monastery, but only on condition that he write no more hymns, and that he be assigned the most menial and degrading tasks, up to and including having to clean the monastery's latrines with his bare hands. The saint accepted this discipline without complaint, and his obedience impressed even the abbot. But the abbot would not release St. John from the demeaning discipline which he had imposed on the saint.

But then the abbot had a dream, in which the Theotokos appeared to him, and spoke to him in these words:

"Why", She demanded, "have you blocked up that fountain, from which could flow waters so sweet, so clear, so abundant, and so much like nectar? I tell you that he could give waters which would refresh worthy minds; waters more excellent than those which flowed out of that rock, in a new and wondrous manner, in the desert: those still waters to which David was drawn by his desire; those waters which Christ promised to the Samaritan woman. Ah, for those waters to flow without a fountain! For that fountain will flow in great abundance, and with such abundance that it will fill the whole world, so that it may overwhelm and overflow the foul seas of heresy with a tremendous surge, and will turn those evil seas into a marvelous sweetness.

Those who are thirsty will come to this water in droves, and those who have no silver of a pure life, having squandered it all through their affections, will be hired by John, through the sincere purity of his teaching and works. He has taken up the prophetic harp, and the psalter of David, with which he will sing a new song, the canticle of the Lord our God. His music will surpass the song of Moses, and Miriam's dancing will prevail. He will surpass the vain fables of Orpheus, and he will sing a spiritual and a heavenly melody. He will imitate the hymns of the Cherubim. He will make all the churches, the daughters of Jerusalem, to be like young women with timbrels, who sing a new song to God, and who proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ. He will deliver the dogmas of the Faith extremely well, and he will strike down every heresy, in its perverseness and obliquity. He will speak good words out of his mouth, and he will proclaim that the works of the King are beyond all admiration."

As a result, the abbot relented, and allowed the saint to compose hymns, and to have them sung at St. Sabbas.