

# The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville

This work is the first complete English translation of the Latin Etymologies of Isidore, bishop of Seville (c. 560–636). Isidore compiled the work between c. 615 and the early 630s and it takes the form of an encyclopedia, arranged by subject matter. It contains much lore of the late classical world beginning with the Seven Liberal Arts, including Rhetoric, and touches on hundreds of topics ranging from the names of God, the terminology of the law, the technologies of fabrics, ships, and agriculture, to the names of cities and rivers, the theatrical arts, and cooking utensils. Isidore provides etymologies for most of the terms he explains, finding in the causes of words the underlying key to their meaning. This book offers a highly readable translation of the twenty books of the Etymologies, one of the most

widely known texts for a thousand years from Isidore's time.

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with the collaboration of

muriel hall

cambridge university press

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge cb2 2ru, UK

First published in print format

isbn-13 978-0-521-83749-1

isbn-13 978-0-511-21969-6

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2006

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521837491](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521837491)

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isbn-10 0-511-21969-5

isbn-10 0-521-83749-9

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**NOTE: From the book entitled, “The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville,” pg. 153 begins BOOK VII. Excerpted here is the specific portion pertaining to Angels, to wit:**

## Book VII

### God, angels, and saints

#### (De deo, angelis et sanctis)

5. For this Trinity some names are appellative (appellativus), and some are proper (proprius). The proper ones name the essence, such as God, Lord, Almighty, Immutable, Immortal. These are proper because they signify the very substance by which the three are one.
6. But appellative names are Father and Son and Holy Spirit, Unbegotten and Begotten and Proceeding. These

same are also relational (*relativus*) because they have reference (*referre*, *ppl. relatus*) to one another. When one says “God,” that is the essence, because he is being named with respect to himself. But when one says Father and Son and Holy Spirit, these names are spoken relationally, because they have reference to one another. 7. For we say ‘Father’ not with respect to himself, but with respect to his relation to the Son, because he has a son; likewise we speak of ‘Son’ relationally, because he has a father; and so ‘Holy Spirit,’ because it is the spirit of the Father and the Son. 8. This relationship is signified by these ‘appellative terms’ (*appellatio*), because they have reference to one another, but the substance itself, in which the three are one, is not thus signified.

Hence the Trinity exists in the relational names of the persons. Deity is not tripled, but exists in singleness, for if it were tripled we would introduce a plurality of gods. 9. For that reason the name of ‘gods’ in the plural is said with regard to angels and holy people, because they are not his equal in merit. 10. Concerning these is the Psalm (81:6 Vulgate), “I have said: You are gods.” But for the

Father and Son and Holy Spirit, because of their one and equal divinity, the name is observed to be not 'gods' but 'God,' as the Apostle says (I Corinthians 8:6): "Yet to us there is but one God," or as we hear from the divine voice (Mark 12:29, etc.), "Hear, O Israel: the Lord thy God is one God," namely inasmuch as he is both the Trinity and the one Lord God.

11. This tenet of faith concerning the Trinity is put

in this way in Greek: 'one  
L[?][?][?],' as if one were to say

'one nature' (natura) or 'one essence' (essentia); 'three

!

?

??[?][?][?],' which in Latin means "three persons" (persona)

or "three substances" (substantia). 12. Now Latin

does not speak of God properly except as 'essence'; people

say 'substance,' indeed, but metaphorically, for in

Greek the term 'substance' actually is understood as a

person of God, not as his nature.<sup>4</sup>

v. Angels (De angelis) 1. Angels (angelus) are so called

in Greek (i.e. O[?][?][?][?]

); they are malachoth in Hebrew,

but translated in Latin as "messengers" (nuntius),

because they announce (nuntiare) the will of God to people.

2. The term for angels is thus the name of their function, not of their nature. Indeed they are always spirits, but when they are commissioned they are called angels.

3. For this reason the license of artists makes wings for them, to signify their swift course on all their missions, just as in poetic fiction the winds are said to have wings to indicate their speed. Whence also Holy Scripture says (Psalm 103:3 Vulgate), "Who walketh upon the wings of the winds."

4. Holy Scripture witnesses moreover that there are nine orders of angels, that is Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Principalities, Powers,

Cherubim, and Seraphim (angelus, archangelus, thronus, dominatio, virtus, principatus, potestas, cherub, seraph).

As to why these names are given to their offices, I shall go through them with explanations. 5. Angels are so called because they are sent from heaven in order to announce (nuntiare) things to humans, for the Greek 'angel' means "messenger" (nuntius) in Latin.

6. Archangels are translated from Greek as "highest

messengers” (summus nuntius), for those who announce small or trifling things are Angels, but those who announce the highest (summus) things are named Archangels. Archangels are so called because they hold primacy among the angels, for ἄρχαγγελοῦ in Greek is translated “prince” (princeps) in Latin. Indeed they are the leaders and princes, and under their Archangel order the tasks for each of the Angels are assigned. 7. That Archangels take precedence over Angels the prophet Zechariah bears witness, saying (2:3–4), “Behold the angel that spoke in me went forth, and another angel went out to meet him. And he said to him: Run, speak to this young man, saying: Jerusalem shall be inhabited without walls.” 8. But if the higher powers did not assign their duties as angels to the lower ones, in no way would one angel have come to know from another what he should say to a human.

9. Moreover certain archangels are called by individual names, so that how they successfully discharge their duties might be designated through their names themselves.

10. ‘Gabriel’ in Hebrew is rendered in our language “Strength of God,” because where divine power or



4 Isidore here speaks of the potentially misleading literal translation of the Greek ἰσχυρός as the Latin sub-stans.

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strength is displayed, Gabriel is sent.<sup>11</sup> Hence at the time when the Lord was about to be born and triumph over the world, Gabriel came to Mary to announce him who deigned to come as a humble person to conquer the aerial powers.<sup>12</sup> ‘Michael’ means “Who is like God,” for when something of wonderful power is done in the world, this archangel is sent. And his name comes from the work itself, because no one is strong enough to do what God can do. <sup>13</sup> ‘Raphael’ means “Healing” or “Medicine of God,” for whenever there is need of healing and curing this archangel is sent by God – hence he is called “Medicine of God.” <sup>14</sup> Hence this same archangel, sent to Tobit, brought healing to his eyes, and restored his sight to him as his blindness was wiped away. Thus the

office of the angel is designated by the interpretation of his name. 15. 'Uriel' means 'Fire of God,' as we read that he appeared as a fire in a bush (cf. Exodus 3:2). We read, indeed, that as fire he was sent from above, and fulfilled what was commanded.

16. Further, Thrones and Dominations and Principalities and Powers and Virtues are understood to be orders and ranks of angels, in which orders the apostle Paul includes the whole heavenly company (Ephesians 1:21, Colossians 1:16, etc.). Because of this same distribution of offices some are called Thrones, some Dominations, some Principalities, some Powers, for the sake of the particular ranks by which they are distinguished from one another.

17. Angelic Virtues are named as the specific ministries through which signs and miracles are made in the world, and because of this they are called Virtues (Virtutes). 18. The Powers are those angels to which opposing forces are subject, and hence they are named with the term Powers (Potestates) because evil spirits are restrained by their power (potestas) so that they may not do as

much harm in the world as they wish. 19. Principalities (Principatus) are those who preside over the bands of angels, and they take the name of Principality because they charge the angels below them with fulfilling the divine ministry. Thus there are some who administer (administrare) and others who assist (adsistere), as is said in Daniel (7:10), "Thousands of thousands ministered (ministrare) to him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before (adsistere) him."

20. Dominations are those who surpass even Virtues and Principalities. They are called Dominations (Dominaciones) because they dominate (dominari) other bands of angels. 21. Thrones are bands of angels that in Latin are called 'seats' (sedes), and they are called Thrones because the Creator 'sits over' (praesidere) them, and discharges his judgments through them. 22. Cherubim too are reckoned as lofty powers indeed in heaven, and an angelic retinue. Translated from Hebrew into Latin they are 'Multitude of Knowledge' (multitudo scientiae), for they are a higher band of angels, and because, placed nearer, they have been more amply filled with divine knowledge than the others, they are called Cherubim,

that is, "Fullness (plenitudo) of Knowledge." 23. They are represented in metal as the two animals resting on the mercy seat of the ark in order to signify the presence of angels in whose midst God is manifested.

24. Likewise the Seraphim are a multitude of angels whose name, translated from Hebrew into Latin, is "Ardent Ones" or "Fiery Ones." They are called 'Ardent Ones' because no angels are stationed between them and God, and therefore, the more nearly they are stationed to his presence, the more they are inflamed with the brightness of the divine light. 25. Whence they veil the face and feet of the one who sits on the throne of God (Isaiah 6:2); for that reason the crowd of other angels cannot fully see the essence of God, because the Cherubim (sic, for 'Seraphim') cloak it.

26. These terms for the bands of angels are specific for the individual orders in such a way that they still may be to some extent common to all. Thus, whereas the Thrones are specifically designated as the seats of God in a particular order of angels, nevertheless the Psalmist says (79:2 Vulgate), "Thou that sittest upon the cherubims."

27. But these orders of angels are called by their

individual names because they have more fully received that particular function in their own order. Although common to them all, still these names are strictly speaking assigned to their own orders. 28. For to each order, as has been said, has been enjoined its proper functions, which they are known to have deserved at the beginning of the world.

Because angels preside over both places and humans an angel witnesses through a prophet, saying (Daniel 10:13), "The prince of the kingdom of the Persians resisted me." 29. Whence it is apparent that there is no place over which angels are not set. Moreover they have charge of the outcome of all endeavors. 30. This is the hierarchy or the array of the angels who stood in their celestial vigor after the Fall of the bad angels, for after the

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apostate angels fell, these were made firm in the steadfastness of eternal blessing. Whence we find, after the creation of heaven in the beginning (Genesis 1:6, 8), "Let there be a firmament (firmamentum) . . . and the firmament was called, Heaven." 31. This is surely the saying of one who is showing that after the Fall of the bad angels

those who were steadfast strove for the firmness (firmitas) of eternal perseverance; diverted by no lapse, falling in no pride, but firmly (firmiter) holding steady in the love and contemplation of God, they consider nothing sweet except him by whom they were created.

32. Further, we read of two Seraphim in Isaiah (6:2); they figuratively signify the Old and New Testaments. We also read that they cover the face and feet of God, because we cannot know the past before the world or the future after the world, but we contemplate only the middle by their witness. 33. Each of them has six wings because in this present age we know concerning the fabric of this world only those things that were made in the six days. That each cries "Holy" three times to the other (Isaiah 6:3) shows the mystery of the Trinity in the one divinity.